Historical-Comparative Analyses of Social Acceptance in the United States, Türkiye, and South Africa

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Abstract: Taking a historical-comparative approach, our goal in this paper is to investigate the social acceptance of people in three countries: the United States, Türkiye, and South Africa. More specifically, we are interested in socio-historical developments related to racial/ethnic conflicts and income inequality and their impact on the social acceptance of racially different people, immigrants/foreign workers, and religiously dissimilar individuals. To accomplish our goal, we draw on Contact Theory and use data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and the World Bank. Regarding the former, we include seven survey waves spanning from 1981 to 2022. Our analysis shows that social acceptance varies significantly across the three countries and that the history of racial/ethnic conflict is an important factor in shaping these outcomes. When racial/ethnic conflicts increase, the social acceptance of racially/ethnically different people and immigrants/foreign workers decreases. Also, over the period of interest, the United States displayed the highest overall social acceptance. While racial social acceptance remained relatively stable, the social acceptance of immigrants/foreign workers decreased slightly. Türkiye experienced a decline in social acceptance toward racially/ethnically different people and immigrants/foreign workers. South Africa exhibited an uptick in racial social acceptance but a meaningful drop in the social acceptance of immigrants/foreign workers. As for the relationship between income inequality and social acceptance, the results are mixed. On the whole, this relationship seems to be rather weak.
Keywords: Social Acceptance, Racial/Ethnic Conflict, Income Inequality, World Values Survey, Gini Score, the United States, Türkiye, South Africa

In this paper, we use a historical-comparative approach to examine the social acceptance of people in three countries: the United States, Türkiye, and South Africa. The aim is to explore how socio-historical developments related to racial/ethnic conflicts and income inequality have influenced social acceptance toward racially different people, immigrants/foreign workers, and religiously dissimilar individuals.

As it is an essential part of human interaction in everyday life in a society, social acceptance is an important concept to study. It speaks to people's sense of belonging in the places in which they live and the extent to which they feel linked to others around the globe. Investigating potential causes of social acceptance is crucial to understanding how to make life better for everyone. Those who feel accepted and valued in a society tend to experience superior outcomes in several areas,

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including self-esteem, mental health, and stress (Anthony et al., 2007; Friedland et al., 1999; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In an increasingly interconnected world, the study of social acceptance beyond national borders is especially valuable. Taking a look at the three countries of interest in this paper—the United States, Türkiye, and South Africa—can offer significant insight into global patterns of social integration and exclusion.

Previous literature demonstrates that a country's context significantly affects individuals' social acceptance toward those unlike themselves. Studies show the impact of factors such as: religious belief and culture (Fletcher & Sergeyev, 2002; Grundel & Maliepaard, 2012; Milligan et al., 2014; Yigit & Tatch, 2017); economic growth (Berggren & Nilsson, 2013; Florida et al., 2008; Friedman, 2005; Gani, 2016; Hadler, 2012); income inequality (Schröder, 2017; Wei, 2022); country's political regime (Corneo & Jeanne, 2009; Dunn & Singh, 2014; Inglehart, 2005; Nie et al., 1996; Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2003); and racial/ethnic and religious fractionalizations (Bangwayo-Skeete & Zikhali, 2013, 2011; Yigit, 2018) on people's social acceptance toward out-group members.

While it gives attention to race/ethnicity and income inequality as important factors in shaping social acceptance, past research does not adequately address the links between these factors and the historical contexts of the three countries of interest in our study, namely the United States, Türkiye, and South Africa. In addition to discussing the historical contexts of these particular countries, we use the most recent data available in our analyses of income inequality and its relationship to the social acceptance of multiple groups of individuals across time. We make a meaningful contribution, then, to the existing literature on social acceptance.

The contention here is that the history of racial/ethnic conflicts and income inequality within a country have an effect on the social acceptance of racially different people, immigrants/foreign workers, and religiously dissimilar individuals. Race, a concept dividing people based on physical characteristics, has played a crucial role in individuals' life chances in the United States and South Africa (Omi & Winant, 1994). Similarly, understanding social acceptance variations in Türkiye requires the consideration of ethno-national conflicts.

The data available to us cover many countries, but we focus specifically on the United States, Türkiye, and South Africa. Several reasons support this choice: these countries have more than four waves of survey data, they exhibit varying levels of income inequality (with South Africa having the highest level), they have significant racial/ethnic conflict histories, and Türkiye offers a unique perspective due to its predominantly Muslim population and ethnic conflict experience.

The Apartheid era in South Africa bears similarities to the period of institutionalized segregation and racism in the United States. Comparing the impacts of these two nations' experiences with institutionalized racism can shed light on levels of social acceptance toward racially different people, immigrants/foreign workers, and religiously dissimilar individuals.

While there has been no institutionalized residential segregation between Turkish and non-Turkish populations, significant economic, social, and democratic disparities exist between regions with a Turkish majority and those with a Kurdish majority. These disparities underscore the importance of considering the influence of historical racial/ethnic developments on social acceptance in this part of the world.

Overall, we have two research questions. The first is whether socio-historical developments related to racial/ethnic conflicts affect social acceptance in the United States, Türkiye, and South Africa. The second is whether income inequality influences social acceptance of people in these three countries.

Theoretical Framework

In *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport (1954/1979) presents Contact Theory, a framework that is especially helpful for understanding the phenomena of interest in this paper. His main contention is that the nature of the contact people experience impacts their attitudes toward those with whom they interact. More specifically, he argues that contact involving equal status between groups, pursuit of common goals across groups, cooperation of distinct groups, and institutional supports that sanction engagement between groups (i.e., law, custom, or local atmosphere) is less likely to result in prejudice. It follows, then, that contact involving unequal status, competition, and few, if any, institutional supports is more likely to lead to prejudice.

Drawing on Contact Theory, we have the following expectations regarding the histories of the United States, Türkiye, and South Africa:

- As racial/ethnic conflicts increase, social acceptance decreases.
- As income inequality increases, social acceptance decreases.

The "unequal status" aspect of Allport's framework is evident in racial/ethnic conflicts and situations in which income inequality is present. Whether it is based on physical characteristics, cultural attributes, and/or economic classes, some groups of people are considered inferior and others superior. This dynamic shapes the extent to which individuals are willing to accept those unlike themselves. In societies with limited resources, competing interests often develop along racial/ethnic and/or economic lines. Under such circumstances, power differences emerge, and people have a tendency to dislike adverse groups. Similarly, where institutional arrangements promote the segregation of various racial/ethnic and/or income groups, social acceptance of out-groups is likely to decline.

Data

To test Contact Theory, we use data from the World Values Survey (WVS) to analyze trends in social acceptance toward racially different people, immigrants/foreign workers, and religiously dissimilar individuals. Our study encompasses seven survey waves spanning from 1981 to 2022, enabling us to trace changes in social acceptance over time. Recognizing the cross-sectional design of the WVS, it is essential to note that each wave involves different respondents. To explore the potential association between economic inequalities and social acceptance, we incorporate Gini scores for the three countries, spanning from 1981 to 2021. The source of the scores is the World Bank Data, a comprehensive open data initiative providing country-level data.

Table 1 shows the number of respondents in the United States, Türkiye, and South Africa for each wave of the WVS.

Table 1

Number of Respondents in the United States, Türkiye, and South Africa (World Values Survey).

	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4	Wave 5	Wave 6	Wave 7
United States	2,325	1,839	1,542	1,200	1,249	2,232	2,596
Türkiye	N/A	1,030	1,907	3,401	1,346	1,605	2,415
South Africa	1,596	N/A	2,935	3,000	2,988	3,531	N/A

Dependent Variables

To examine the phenomena of interest in this paper, we use three dependent variables: 1) racial social acceptance, 2) social acceptance toward immigrants/foreign workers, and 3) religious social acceptance. The WVS asked respondents about their willingness to be neighbors with racially different people, immigrants/foreign workers, and religiously dissimilar individuals. While we use the "neighbor" dimension of social acceptance, it is important to acknowledge that other ways of considering and measuring this concept exist, such as intermarriage or close friendship.

Independent Variables

In line with existing literature, our analysis focuses on two key independent, country-level variables that may correlate with social acceptance within the three countries. These variables are the history of racial/ethnic conflict and income inequality. Regarding the latter, the Gini score is a statistical metric that quantifies income or wealth distribution among a nation's population (Yitzhaki, 1979). It primarily reflects income inequality within a country, ranging from 0 (perfect equality) to 100 (maximum inequality).

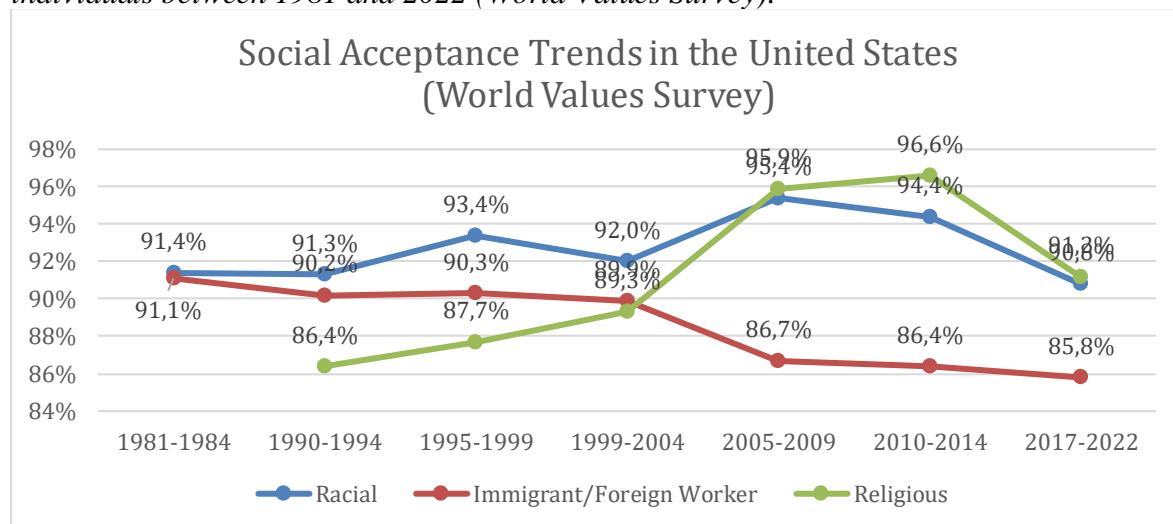## Descriptive Statistics - United States

The WVS asked respondents if they would be neighbors with people who are racially different from them. Figure 1 shows that in the first wave, 91.4% of respondents in the United States reported a willingness to be neighbors (i.e., they were socially accepting), followed by wave 2 (91.3%), wave 3 (93.4%), wave 4 (92.0%), and wave 5 (95.4%). In wave 5, respondents reported the highest percentage of social acceptance over a four-decade period in the United States. Later, in wave 6, 94.4% reported being accepting, and in the last wave, 90.8%.

Another area of concern to the WVS was whether respondents would be neighbors with immigrants/foreign workers. The first wave of respondents in the United States reported a 91.1% acceptance rate. Additionally, 90.2% of respondents in wave 2, 90.3% in wave 3, 89.9% in wave 4, 86.7% in wave 5, 86.4% in wave 6, and 85.8% in wave 7 reported being accepting. The last wave in the United States had the lowest acceptance rate. Taken together, these rates indicate a linear decline over time in being socially accepting of immigrants/foreign workers.

The second, third, and fourth waves of the WVS include information about respondents' attitudes toward Muslims. For 1990 to 2004, we use Muslims as a target group. In the second wave, 86.4% of respondents in the United States reported being accepting of Muslims, followed by 87.7% of respondents in the third wave and 89.3% in the fourth wave. For the fifth, sixth, and seventh waves, the WVS did not ask respondents specifically about their social acceptance of Muslims. Therefore, we use religiously dissimilar people as the group of interest. The fifth wave saw 95.9% of respondents expressing an attitude of acceptance. In the sixth wave, the rate increased slightly to 96.6% and then took a downward turn in the seventh wave with 91.2% of respondents in the United States indicating a willingness to be neighbors with religiously dissimilar individuals.

Figure 1

Percentage of respondents in the United States who reported that they would not mind being neighbors with racially different people, immigrants/foreign workers, and religiously dissimilar individuals between 1981 and 2022 (World Values Survey).
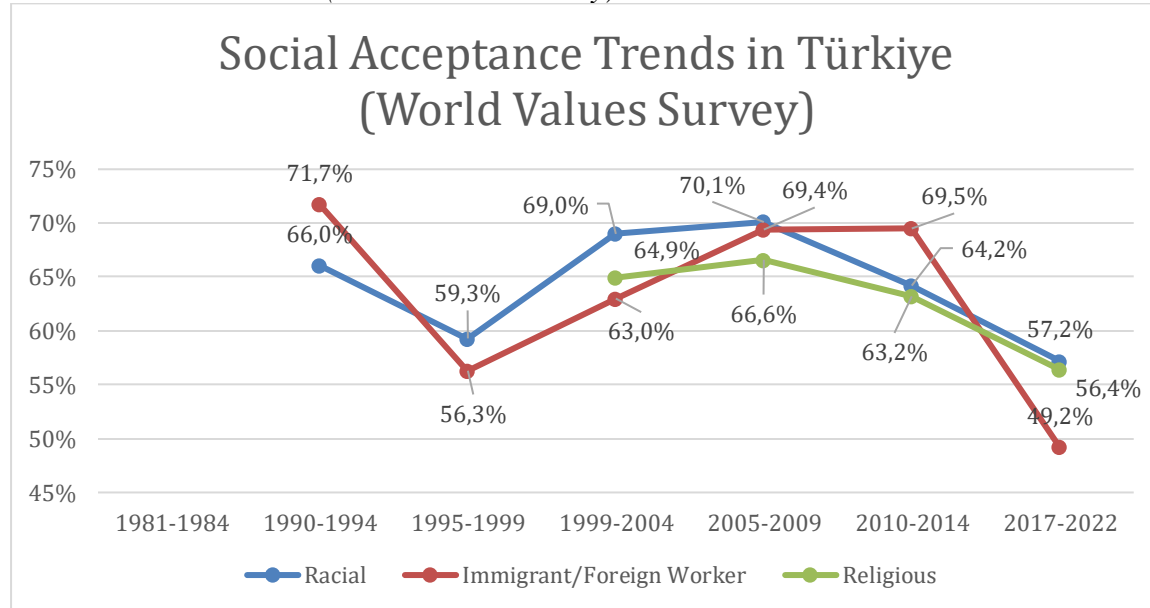

Descriptive Statistics – Türkiye

Figure 2 illustrates WVS results for Türkiye. In wave 2, 66.0% of respondents reported being accepting of racially/ethnically different people. This rate decreased to 59.3% of respondents in wave 3. In wave 4, 69.0% of respondents reported an attitude of acceptance. This rate increased to 70.1% of respondents in wave 5 and then decreased to 64.2% in wave 6. In the last wave, 57.2% of respondents reported being accepting of racially/ethnically different people.

Furthermore, the WVS asked respondents if they would be neighbors with immigrants/foreign workers. In Türkiye, 71.7% of respondents in wave 2 reported an attitude of acceptance toward these out-groups, followed by 56.3% in wave 3, 63.0% in wave 4, 69.4% in wave 5, 69.5% in wave 6, and 49.2% in wave 7. Overall, the situation for immigrants/foreign workers has changed significantly over time.

The WVS also asked about respondents' willingness to be neighbors with religiously dissimilar individuals. In the fourth wave, 64.9% of respondents reported being accepting. Somewhat similar results came in later waves, with 66.6% of respondents in wave 5, 63.2% in wave 6, and 56.4% in wave 7 indicating an attitude of acceptance toward religiously dissimilar individuals.

Figure 2

Percentage of respondents in Türkiye who reported that they would not mind being neighbors with racially different people, immigrants/foreign workers, and religiously dissimilar individuals between 1981 and 2022 (World Values Survey).

## Descriptive Statistics - South Africa

Figure 3 shows WVS results for South Africa. In wave 1, 75.3% of respondents reported being accepting of racially/ethnically different people. The rate went up to 88.8% of respondents in wave 3, which was approximately 13.0% higher than in wave 1. In wave 4, 76.4% of respondents reported an attitude of acceptance. The rates for wave 5 and wave 6 were 90.0% and 80.8%, respectively.

In addition, the WVS asked respondents whether they would be neighbors with immigrants/foreign workers. In South Africa, 93.0% of respondents in wave 1 reported being accepting. The rates for later waves were 78.7% in wave 3, 69.4% in wave 4, 73.6% in wave 5, and 59.1% in wave 6. A notable decrease in acceptance occurred between wave 1 and wave 6.

Finally, the WVS asked respondents about their willingness to be neighbors with religiously dissimilar individuals. In wave 5, 93.6% of respondents reported an attitude of acceptance. The rate decreased to 84.0% in wave 6.

Figure 3

Percentage of respondents in South Africa who reported that they would not mind being neighbors with racially different people, immigrants/foreign workers, and religiously dissimilar individuals between 1981 and 2022 (World Values Survey).
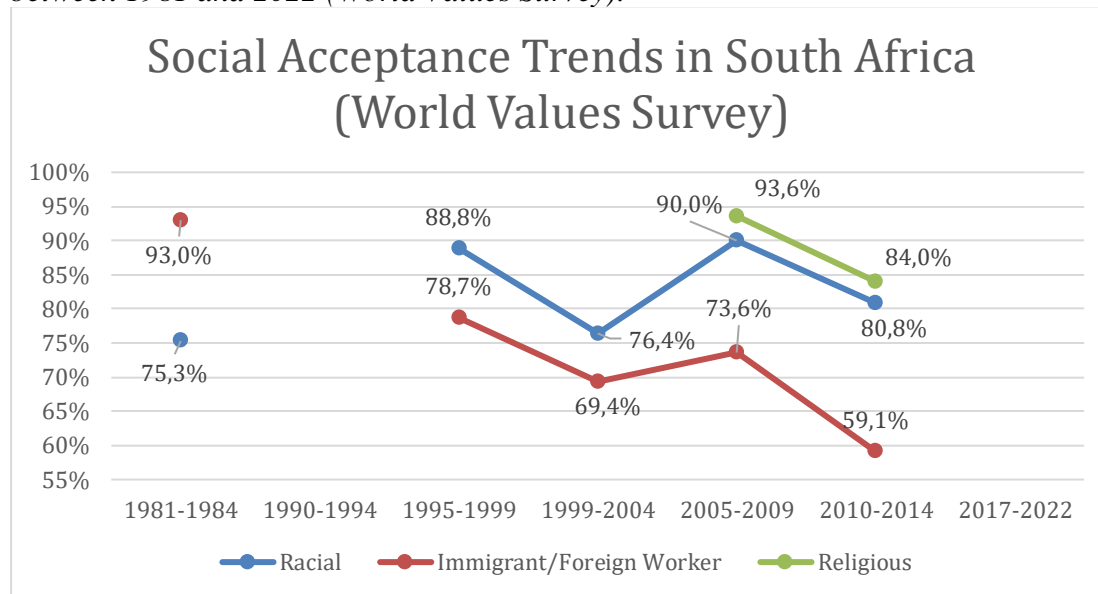
Country-Level Socio-Historical and Economic Factors

This section explores country-level socio-historical and economic developments that influence the social acceptance of racially different people, immigrants/foreign workers, and religiously dissimilar individuals. Hereafter, when the United States and South Africa are under discussion, the focus is on racial conflicts, not ethnic ones, and their impact on social acceptance. Contrastingly, when Türkiye is at issue, ethnic conflicts are the center of attention, as opposed to racial tensions. As a reminder, we expect to see a decline in social acceptance during times of intensified racial/ethnic strife.

Another point of interest here is the relationship between income inequality and social acceptance. Prior research indicates that income inequality in a country (which we measure using the Gini score) impacts perceptions of racially different people, immigrants/foreign workers, and religiously dissimilar individuals (Berggren & Nilsson, 2016; Hadler, 2012; Persell et al., 2001). To reiterate, we expect social acceptance to go down during times when income inequality is greater.

Racism and Social Acceptance in the United States

Race, an arguably socially constructed concept, has transformed and shaped US society deeply. Many people consider it to be a fundamental organizing principle of social life that structures politics, economics, and culture in the United States (e.g., Omi & Winant, 1994). A prominent black sociologist, Du Bois (1903/1993), maintains that the problem of the 20th century was the problem of the color line between blacks and whites. Since then, whiteness has been a source of privilege and protection. The civil rights movement improved the situation for blacks in the United States, but there are those who contend that race remains a fundamental category of

disempowerment for some groups (e.g., Omi & Winant, 1994). More specifically, race is a source of empowerment for whites and disempowerment for non-whites.

The racialization (Omi & Winant, 1994) process in the United States is based on the idea of singling out certain groups for unique treatment because of their perceived physical characteristics. In this case, whites are seen as superior and non-whites, including immigrants, inferior. The racialization process has affected American social life since the exploration of the continent (Thornton, 1987). What is more, this process has been important for generations when it comes to whites', non-whites', and immigrants' social practices and civic/human rights (Omi & Winant, 1994).

Institutionalized racism, which refers to racism that social and political institutions have legalized and perpetuated (Franklin & Moss, 2000; Massey & Denton, 1993; Omi & Winant, 1994), has detrimental effects on multiple areas of life, including economics, criminal justice, health, education, and housing. In the United States, this type of racism has come in various forms; some examples are the historical exploitation of blacks through slavery (Franklin & Moss, 2000), residential racial segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993), racial disparities in labor market/workplace outcomes (Kirschenman et al., 1991), racial differences in experiences involving the criminal justice system (Alexander & West, 2012; Pager, 2002), racial inequalities in education (Johnson, 2006), and the racial gap in wealth accumulation (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006).

According to the WVS and as Figure 1 shows, from 1981 to 2022, the vast majority of respondents in the United States (over 90.0% in every wave), regardless of their race, reported that they would be neighbors with racially different people. This reality suggests that, at the very least, overt racism was not as common over the period of interest in this paper as it was previously. Though the data support the notion that Americans have been highly accepting of those who are racially different from them, some sociologists argue that racism continues to be a major problem and that its appearance changed after the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Dovidio, 2001; Feagin, 1991; Massey & Denton, 1993). The traditional way of racism (i.e., Jim Crow) disappeared from the scene after the civil rights movement, but as Bobo et al. (1997) and Schuman et al. (1997) indicate, racist ideology did not go away. Instead, its visibility has changed.

In his position as a prominent sociologist on race relations in the United States, Bonilla-Silva (2001) brings attention to this changing dynamic in race relations and the new language of discrimination that is part of it. In his book titled *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, he expresses the view that blacks and other ethnic minorities are on the disadvantaged end of a persistent inequality that continues to be a problem in the United States. That said, compared to the Jim Crow period, the racism of the post-civil rights era has some distinct features. To elaborate, it is increasingly covert, embedded in the operations of institutions, less direct when it comes to racial terminology, and invisible to most whites.

For Bonilla-Silva (2001), a new ideology has emerged in the post-civil rights era, the ideology of color-blind racism. Color-blind racism uses free market ideology (i.e., liberalism) to justify the current racial order in the United States. Additionally, though color-blindness sounds progressive, he notes that interviews with people make it clear that color-blind racists exist and draw on liberalism to excuse racial inequalities. In other words, color-blindness is a way to blame blacks and their culture for the failures they experience.

In short, the aforementioned researchers not only have an interest in overt racism (i.e., Jim Crow), but they also point to covert racism (i.e., color-blindness) that they claim is pervasive in the post-civil rights era in the United States. As it is hidden, this covert racism is challenging to address and is unknown to some people, particularly whites.

Ethnic Conflict and Social Acceptance in Türkiye

This part of the paper examines institutionalized ethnic inequalities between the Turkish majority, a group that is ethnically Turkish, and non-Turkish ethnic minorities. We expect to find a negative relationship between ethnic conflicts and social acceptance. Stated another way, as ethnic conflicts increase, social acceptance decreases. In the United States and South Africa, racial identity is quite important. However, in Türkiye, ethnic identity is a major issue and has implications for individuals' life chances.

Studies show that, since the early 1980s, identity politics has increased, making conflicts and concerns about social acceptance between groups more salient (Sarigil, 2009). In the history of modern Türkiye, the rise of the Kurdish ethnic identity and the so-called "Kurdish question" has been a very challenging problem (Dixon & Ergin, 2010; Kirişci, 1997; Romano & Gurses, 2014; Sarigil, 2009; Sarigil & Karakoc, 2017). As it is not feasible to cover all of the history pertaining to the Kurdish question starting in the early 20th century, we focus specifically on the period from 1980 to 2014.

In terms of historical background, it is important to note that the Ottoman Empire was a multi-ethnic, multi-religion, and multi-nation society; however, in 1923, the newly established Turkish republic took a nation-building approach, which involved mandating that the Turkish identity be the only legitimate one and eradicating all other ethnic identities (Abbas & Yigit, 2014). Starting in the 1930s, Kurdish groups have challenged and rejected this normative ethnic identity. Kurdish people in Türkiye have experienced systematic persecution, marginalization, and economic disadvantage (Romano & Gurses, 2014; Yigit, 2015). Particularly in the southeastern region of the country, Kurdish culture, folklore, and language have been banned from public and private life (Aslan, 2015). Similarly, the Turkish government has denied the Kurdish ethnic identity, categorizing Kurds as "Mountain Turks'" until 1991 (Hannum, 1996). The Turkish state apparatus has systematically discriminated against, excluded, disenfranchised, and forcefully assimilated Kurdish people, which is comparable to what has transpired in the United States and South Africa when it comes to race relations.

The European powers, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the beginning of the 20th century, partitioned out Kurdish people, an ethnic group without a sovereign nation, between Türkiye, Iraq, Syria, and Iran (Kirişci, 1997). Scholars have studied Kurdish marginalization from multiple angles, but the 12 September 1980 Turkish military coup stands out as being very detrimental in the conflict between the Republic of Türkiye and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a terrorist organization based in Türkiye, Iraq, and Syria. According to a Kurdish intellectual, Altan Tan, the military coup in 1980 reinforced the increasing brutality of Turkish state practices on Kurdish minority groups; these conditions consequently led to greater support for the PKK (Tan, 2011).

An armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state began in 1984, not all that distant from the 12 September 1980 Turkish military coup (Abbas & Yigit, 2014). During the 1980s and 1990s, this conflict negatively affected the engagement between Kurdish and Turkish citizens (Sarigil & Karakoc, 2017; Scarboro & Yigit, 2014). The armed conflict reached its peak in the 1990s until the capture of the PKK leader in 1999 (Aslan, 2015; Romano & Gurses, 2014).

Regarding ethnic relations in Türkiye and their association with levels of social acceptance in the country, Figure 2 indicates that in 1990, the second wave of the WVS, 66.0% of respondents reported being accepting of racially (or ethnically in the Turkish context) different people. In the third wave, this rate decreased to 59.3%. This decline coincides with the intensification of the armed conflict between the Turkish state and Kurdish insurgent group.

From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, as a result of the armed conflict in southeast Türkiye, millions of Kurdish people were forcefully displaced and moved to mostly cities and more populated areas of the country (Çelik, 2005). As is clear in Figure 2, social acceptance toward immigrants/foreign workers decreased from 71.7% in the early 1990s (wave 2) to 56.3% during the second half of the 1990s (wave 3). The influx of Kurdish people into certain places in Türkiye seems to have contributed to a shift in perspective on immigrants/foreign workers.

After the capture of the PKK leader, the new leaders of the PKK announced a ceasefire (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2010). This ceasefire was held for five years in the country. According to Figure 2, which illustrates WVS results for Türkiye, from wave 3 to wave 4, social acceptance of racially (ethnically) different people surged (59.3% to 69.0%). Likewise, during this period, respondents' willingness to accept immigrants/foreign workers saw an upward trend (56.3% to 63.0%). These results support the view that when ethnic conflicts decrease, social acceptance increases. Alternatively stated, as ethnic conflicts increase, social acceptance decreases.

Between 2004 and 2006, the armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state forces restarted; however, the intensity of the war was slow. In the fall of 2006, the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire until 2012. During this period, the WVS conducted two waves in Türkiye. In wave 5 (2007) of the WVS, after the unilateral ceasefire that the PKK declared, respondents' social acceptance of racially (ethnically) different people and immigrants/foreign workers increased compared to the previous wave. The former went from 69.0% to 70.1% and the latter from 63.0% to 69.4%. In wave 6 (2012), social acceptance toward racially (ethnically) different people decreased (70.1% to 64.2%) and immigrants/foreign workers stayed about the same (69.4% to 69.5%). Respondents reported being accepting of immigrants/foreign workers at a much lower level in wave 7 (49.2%). The 2012 resumption of the armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state forces appears to have prompted a decline in social acceptance toward racially (ethnically) different people and immigrants/foreign workers.

Racism and Social Acceptance in South Africa

In South Africa, race has shaped institutional structures and so it has impacted society by favoring one group over another (Clark & Worger, 2011). What follows is a brief description of the Apartheid era of South Africa, emphasizing institutionalized racism, and the 1984 agreement ending the Apartheid system. Of particular interest to us is the relationship between racial conflicts and social acceptance toward racially different people and immigrants/foreign workers. We expect periods of intense racial strife to be associated with declines in social acceptance.

From 1948 to 1994, Apartheid (the state of being apart) was a legal system of racial segregation in South Africa (Clark & Worger, 2011; Dubow, 2014; Welsh, 2010). During this era, whites were numerically minorities, but they had power to rule the country and legal protections not available to others. Although racist applications were part of everyday life for people in South Africa prior to World War II, the Apartheid system, with its legalization of unequal practices that advantaged whites, brought discrimination to a new level (Clark & Worger, 2011; Dubow, 2014; Welsh, 2010). The Apartheid system involved the white minority ruling and controlling the black majority (Dubow, 2014; Johnson, 2016). In addition to banning interracial marriage and other types of integration of racial groups, the Apartheid system ensured that different racial groups developed separately in the area of economics. For blacks, developing economically was extremely hard; therefore, the economic inequality between them and whites grew (Dubow, 2014; Welsh, 2010).

In an effort to end this unequal treatment, blacks engaged in various forms of resistance (Dubow, 2014). The Sharpeville massacre occurred in 1960 when blacks demonstrated against the

passage of a law establishing an internal passport system meant to keep segregation along racial lines in place, resulting in the death of 69 people and severe injury to hundreds of others (Clark & Worger, 2011; Dubow, 2014). The protests against Apartheid increased dramatically in the 1980s when people united in opposition to the government's activities and the unequal treatment of blacks (Clark & Worger, 2011). During this time, churches, civic organizations, and student organizations united and held demonstrations against the Apartheid system (Clark & Worger, 2011). The government responded very harshly, killing hundreds of protestors and arresting thousands (Clark & Worger, 2011). By 1990, due to increasing violence and demands for equality, the president of South Africa had to bring a new reform to end Apartheid. It took several years of negotiations between the state and the African National Congress, as well as other governmental and non-governmental organizations, to reach this goal (Clark & Worger, 2011; Dubow, 2014; Welsh, 2010). In 1994, from April 26 to 29, South Africa held its first non-racial election. In that election, all citizens, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or religious beliefs, could participate, and they elected Nelson Mandela as the first black president in the history of the country (Welsh, 2010).

This information about history is helpful for understanding South Africa's changing levels of social acceptance over time. As Figure 3 shows, in the first wave of the WVS, which was during Apartheid, 75.3% of respondents reported being accepting of racially different people. A little more than a decade later, in wave 3 (1996), which took place two years after the first non-racial election, respondents reported an acceptance rate of 88.8%. When under the Apartheid system, then, respondents were less inclined to report an accepting attitude toward racially different people than was the case after the cessation of legalized discrimination.

Extant research indicates that racial/ethnic conflicts on the African continent have an impact on the attitudes residents hold, including in South Africa (Bangwayo-Skeete & Zikhali, 2011). In the coming paragraphs, we highlight some important events that may have influenced South Africans' willingness to accept those unlike themselves. Of particular interest is the area of immigrants/foreign workers.

According to Pillay (2017), economically struggling people in South Africa have viewed immigrants as a threat. In 1985, during the Apartheid era, Indian immigrants were brought to the country as indentured or seasonal laborers. This change in demographics triggered an aggressive response from the Zulu, numerically the biggest tribe in South Africa. During four days of riots in Durban, 53 black youth and two Indians were shot, and more than 1,500 Indian houses were set on fire (Anon, 1985). In 2008, a similar incident occurred (Bearak & Dugger, 2008), leaving many immigrants dead and multiple houses on fire. This incident happened in immigrants' neighborhoods around Johannesburg and transpired over a period of weeks. The victims were immigrants from Malawi, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. More recently, another deadly incident took place, resulting in the loss of life for 12 immigrants (Anon, 2019). In the central streets of Johannesburg, South Africans chanted, "Foreigners must go back to where they came from."

In a reflection of these immigrant-related historical events in South Africa, Figure 3 illustrates dramatic changes in social acceptance toward immigrants/foreign workers over time. To elaborate, in the first wave of the WVS, which was during Apartheid, 93.0% of respondents reported being accepting of immigrants/foreign workers; however, after the first non-racial election, this rate dropped to 78.7% in the third wave. The 1985 Durban riots occurred after the first wave and forced thousands of immigrants to leave the city. These riots seem to have had a significant effect that is evident in the third wave, as a much lower percentage of respondents expressed an attitude of acceptance than was the case in the first wave.

Also, a dramatic decrease in social acceptance toward immigrants/foreign workers happened between wave 5 and wave 6. In wave 5 (2006), before the 2008 riots in the streets of

Johannesburg, 73.6% of respondents reported being accepting of immigrants/foreign workers; however, in wave 6 (2013), this rate fell to 59.1%. The information in Figure 3, especially the results for wave 6, makes it clear that, in the history of South Africa, immigrants/foreign workers have been accepted the least. Hence, the aforementioned immigrant-related events appear to have mattered a great deal.

Gini Scores and Social Acceptance in the United States

In addition to historical events, we are interested in the connection between income inequality and social acceptance. Though it is a worthwhile endeavor, understanding the origins of the former is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, our emphasis is on shifts in income inequality (i.e., Gini scores) and their association with changes in respondents' attitudes of acceptance toward racially different people, immigrants/foreign workers, and religiously dissimilar individuals. We expect increases in income inequality to be linked to decreases in social acceptance.

Figure 4
Gini scores for the United States, Türkiye, and South Africa, 1981 to 2021 (World Bank Data).
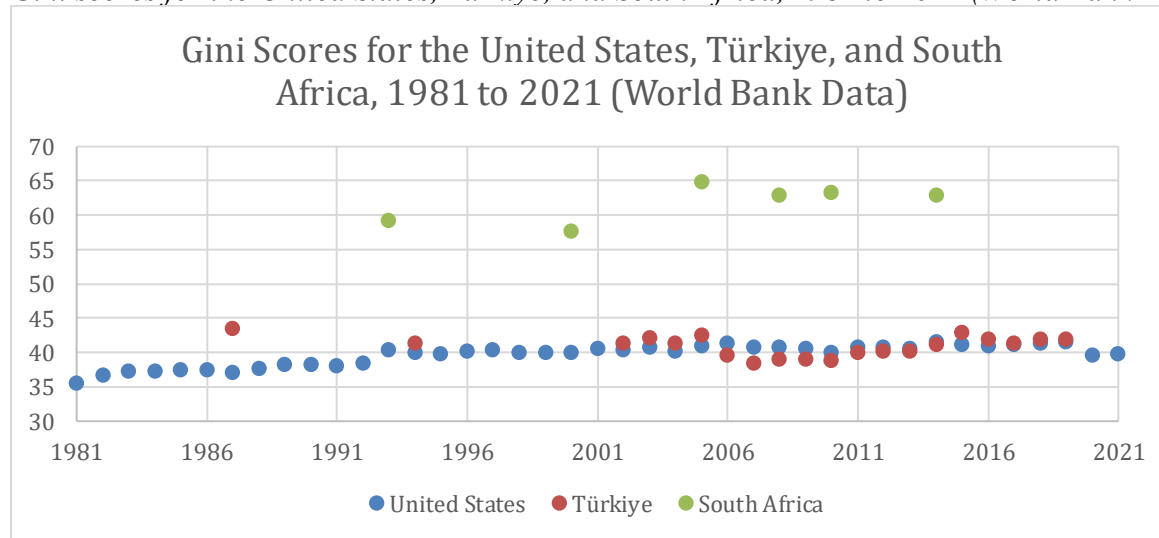

Figure 4 shows Gini scores for the United States, Türkiye, and South Africa. The period of interest is 1981 to 2021. What is clear is that income inequality in the United States increased somewhat linearly from 35.5 in 1981 to 39.8 in 2021. Over the same time frame, Figure 1 indicates a steady decline in respondents' willingness to accept immigrants/foreign workers. In wave 1, 91.1% of respondents reported being accepting of immigrants/foreign workers; however, in wave 7, this rate decreased to 85.8%. Comparing the information in Figure 4 to that in Figure 1, what seems to be the case is that income inequality has an impact on attitudes toward immigrants/foreign workers, but not on perceptions of racially different people or religiously dissimilar individuals.

To summarize, the data offer only partial support for our expectation that decreases in social acceptance come with increases in income inequality. The situation for immigrants/foreign workers is distinct from that of other groups. As income inequality goes up, respondents' social acceptance of immigrants/foreign workers drops. It is important to note that this result gives support to the notion that an association exists between these two variables but does not establish a causal relationship.

Gini Scores and Social Acceptance in Türkiye

Regarding Türkiye, the earliest Gini score available to us is for 1987. However, the Gini score for 1994 (41.3) is the first one of interest here, as it coincides with the earliest period for which we have WVS data on social acceptance. Next comes the Gini score for 2002, which is 41.4. This number indicates a very slight increase in income inequality over time. For the period from 1994 (wave 2) to 2002 (wave 4), Figure 2 shows that respondents' willingness to be neighbors with racially/ethnically different people went up (66.0% to 69.0%). In contrast, the social acceptance of immigrants/foreign workers declined (71.7% to 63.0%). Through wave 4 of the WVS (1999-2004), our expectation concerning the relationship between income inequality and social acceptance seems to hold for only immigrants/foreign workers. On the whole, the Gini scores that link to wave 5 of the WVS (2005-2009) are lower than in previous years, and those that align with wave 6 (2010-2014) are higher than the ones in wave 5. Between wave 5 and wave 6, the social acceptance of immigrants/foreign workers did not go down, which is contrary to our expectation that a decrease in being accepting tends to accompany an increase in income inequality. Unlike the case for racially/ethnically different people and immigrants/foreign workers, the trend line for religiously dissimilar individuals matches our expectation; as income inequality rises, the social acceptance of the religiously distinct falls. For example, from 2006 to 2019, Gini scores show an upward trend overall (39.6 to 41.9), and rates of acceptance move in the opposite direction. Taken together, the results in Figure 2 and Figure 4 suggest that in the Turkish context, income inequality is associated with social acceptance some of the time.

Gini Scores and Social Acceptance in South Africa

In terms of South Africa, Figure 4 indicates six data points for Gini scores between 1981 and 2021. When comparing the Gini scores for the three countries of interest in this paper, what is clear is that South Africa has the highest ones in all years. In other words, South Africa has had particularly high income inequality over a long period of time.

According to Figure 4, South Africa's two earliest Gini scores are for 1993 and 2000. These two scores are 59.3 and 57.8, respectively. From 1993 to 2000, then, income inequality went down. Based on the information in Figure 3, during this period, it appears that respondents' social acceptance of racially different people increased (75.3% to 76.4%). Important to note, though, is that we do not have data for wave 2 (1990-1994), so our conclusion is rooted in data for wave 1 (1981-1984), wave 3 (1995-1999), and wave 4 (1999-2004). Contrastingly, respondents' willingness to accept immigrants/foreign workers fell sharply, from 93.0% in wave 1 to 69.4% in wave 4. Through wave 4, our expectation—as income inequality increases, social acceptance decreases—holds for only racially different people. Starting in 2005, Gini scores went up significantly and remained consistently higher than in the previous period. As is evident in Figure 3, from wave 4 to wave 5 (2005-2009), rates for the social acceptance of racially different people and immigrants/foreign workers surged. This finding contradicts our expectation, as it does not support the notion that income inequality and social acceptance have a negative relationship. With regard to the possible connection between income inequality and the social acceptance of religiously dissimilar individuals, the data in Figure 4 and Figure 3 do not show a clear association. Stated another way, the Gini scores that correspond to wave 5 and wave 6 (2010-2014) are similar, but respondents' willingness to accept the religiously distinct drops from 93.6% to 84.0%. If the data were consistent with our expectation, we would see no meaningful change in the social acceptance of religiously dissimilar individuals.

In short, the data for South Africa that we see in Figure 4 and Figure 3 do not offer compelling evidence for our expectation that a negative relationship exists between income inequality and social acceptance. This conclusion applies when it comes to respondents' views on racially different people, immigrants/foreign workers, and religiously dissimilar individuals.

Discussion

To reiterate, we are interested in understanding the social acceptance of people in three countries: the United States, Türkiye, and South Africa. In particular, our aim is to explore how socio-historical developments related to racial/ethnic conflicts and income inequality have shaped the social acceptance of racially different people, immigrants/foreign workers, and religiously dissimilar individuals. Drawing on Contact Theory, we have the following expectations:

- As racial/ethnic conflicts increase, social acceptance decreases.
- As income inequality increases, social acceptance decreases.

Our results indicate strong support for the first expectation. To elaborate, the WVS data show that the level of racial/ethnic social acceptance varies significantly across the three countries. Considering the assumptions of Contact Theory, this finding makes sense, as the nature of the contact people in these countries experienced over the period of interest in this paper was different. Here, variations in relations involving unequal statuses, as well as in institutional arrangements, were important.

For example, the post-civil rights era in the United States has some distinct features, including that overt racism is less acceptable than in previous times. So, while inequality is still present, the institutional landscape has changed regarding race. In an environment in which overt racial discrimination is largely unacceptable, respondents to surveys may be inclined to express a willingness to be neighbors with those who are racially unlike themselves even if it does not coincide with their true feelings. So, at the very least, in the United States, the cessation of Jim Crow prompted some people to move away from an openly racist stance. Hence, as Figure 1 demonstrates, from 1981 to 2022, Americans consistently reported relatively high levels of social acceptance toward racially different people (over 90.0% in all seven waves). Of course, an alternative explanation is that institutional changes encouraged Americans to become less racist than was the case in the pre-civil rights era.

When it comes to the social acceptance of those who are racially/ethnically different, the situation in Türkiye varies greatly from that in the United States. According to Figure 2, between 1990 and 2022, respondents' social acceptance of racially/ethnically different people was uneven and much lower than in the United States. For instance, in wave 2 (1990-1994), 66.0% of respondents were accepting, and by wave 7 (2017-2022), this rate dropped to 57.2%. To understand these realities, it is important to consider the unique circumstances surrounding ethnic conflicts in Türkiye. In terms of Contact Theory, during the period of interest in this paper, the nature of the contact between people in Türkiye was not the same as in the United States, especially as it pertained to relations between unequal groups and institutional arrangements. Since the mid-1980s, the intense friction between the Turkish state forces and the PKK has negatively impacted the social acceptance of individuals from different ethnicities, including both Turks and Kurds. This friction has fueled a perception within each group that the other poses a threat to its existence. Given that the Turkish state has exercised its power to discriminate against Kurds, the latter seems to be at a disadvantage in the ongoing struggle.

In distinction, the focus of racial conflicts in the United States and South Africa primarily revolves around achieving equality in social, political, and economic domains. While blacks in

South Africa constitute a numerical majority, they are still recognized as a separate group alongside the white population. Similarly, the African American community in the United States faces discrimination. However, in the Turkish context, since the modern Turkish state's establishment, Kurdish people, who make up roughly a fifth of the population, and other ethnic minorities have historically faced state denial or non-recognition of their identities. This phenomenon might be partly attributed to the historical emphasis within the Turkish constitution on a unified national identity of "Turks." The institutional arrangements in the country, then, appear to be driving a wedge between various ethnic groups seeking to preserve identities that matter to them.

As for South Africa, what is clear in Figure 3 is that, when Apartheid was in place, the rate for the social acceptance of racially different people was lower than in later years. In wave 1 (1981-1984), which was during Apartheid, 75.3% of respondents were accepting of those who were unlike themselves in a racial sense, and in wave 3 (1995-1999), which was after the end of Apartheid, this rate was up to 88.8%. Also notable is that these rates of social acceptance are significantly lower than those for the United States. A possible explanation for this reality is that the United States is more distant from its period of overt discrimination than is the case for South Africa. Another important point is that economic inequality between whites and blacks persisted after the abolishment of the Apartheid system, and whites largely maintained their dominant class position. The end of Apartheid did away with overt racism, but the economic difficulties of the black population did not change at the country level. These conditions seem to have influenced South Africans' social acceptance toward racially different people during the period of interest in this paper. In line with Contact Theory, the nature of the contact is pertinent here. More specifically, South Africa's relatively high inequality between groups and its recency to institutionalized racial discrimination made for a more precarious situation than in the United States.

In addition to exploring the roots of racial/ethnic social acceptance, we seek to shed light on the links between historical context and attitudes toward immigrants/foreign workers. According to WVS data, respondents in each of the three countries of interest in this paper—the United States, Türkiye, and South Africa—reported varying levels of social acceptance toward immigrants/foreign workers. As shown in Figure 1, from 1981 to 2022, Americans' willingness to be neighbors with immigrants/foreign workers never dropped below 85.8%. Comparatively, the lowest rate of acceptance for Türkiye was 49.2% (Figure 2) and for South Africa 59.1% (Figure 3). In the United States, the aforementioned general movement away from legal discrimination and toward a culture of inclusivity may have contributed to relatively high social acceptance of not only racially different people but of immigrants/foreign workers. That said, Figure 1 also indicates that Americans' rate of acceptance declined over time, from 91.1% in wave 1 (1981-1984) to 85.8% in wave 7 (2017-2022). As one of the world's most economically developed countries, the United States has attracted a large number of immigrants (both legal and illegal), leading to competition in the labor market and emerging security concerns for some citizens. This dynamic links to Contact Theory, which states that the nature of contact is of the utmost importance. In this case, the presence of competition, as opposed to cooperation, was a driver of unwelcoming attitudes.

In contrast to the United States and South Africa, Türkiye has not been a popular final destination for immigrants, until recently. The impact of this change is evident in the WVS data. Figure 2 shows that following wave 6 (2010-2014), respondents in Türkiye reported much less willingness to be neighbors with immigrants/foreign workers (69.5% to 49.2%). Again, this finding is consistent with the main contention of Contact Theory: the nature of the contact matters. An increase in the immigrant population in Türkiye intensified competition in the labor market, which resulted in a decrease in respondents' social acceptance of immigrants/foreign workers.

Likewise, over the period of interest in this paper, citizens and immigrants in South Africa competed for similar jobs in the labor market. Additionally, what is clear in Figure 3 is that respondents were far more averse to being neighbors with immigrants/foreign workers in wave 6 (2010-2014) than in wave 1 (1981-1984). In wave 1, the acceptance rate was 93.0%, and in wave 6, it was 59.1%. So, while the end of Apartheid seemed to bring greater social acceptance of racially different people, we cannot say the same for immigrants/foreign workers. In fact, starting in 1985 and continuing over the next several years, a number of conflicts involving immigrants took place in the country. Many citizens were struggling economically, and the influx of immigrants created a dynamic in which the former felt threatened. As is the case for the United States and Türkiye, the situation in South Africa fits well with Contact Theory and its emphasis on the nature of contact. In particular, two groups with unequal status—citizens and immigrants—were in competition with each other for scarce jobs, which resulted in declining levels of acceptance over time. As noted, the United States experienced much the same in its history. One important difference between the two countries is that the overall material conditions in the United States were better than in South Africa, meaning that citizens in the former were probably not struggling as much as those in the latter. This difference can perhaps at least partly explain why Americans consistently reported higher levels of social acceptance toward immigrants/foreign workers than was the case for South Africans.

The preceding discussion assesses our first expectation, which is that as racial/ethnic conflicts increase, social acceptance decreases. The evidence offers strong support for this expectation. The question now is whether the second expectation holds up. This expectation is that as income inequality increases, social acceptance decreases. Comparing the data in Figure 4 to that in Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3, what is clear is that the relationship between income inequality and social acceptance is rather weak. To start, as Figure 4 indicates, in the United States, income inequality increased somewhat linearly, from 35.5 in 1981 to 39.8 in 2021. During the same period, Figure 1 illustrates a steady decline in respondents' willingness to accept immigrants/foreign workers (91.1% to 85.8%). These findings support our expectation; however, the data do not support the notion that a relationship between income inequality and the other dimensions of social acceptance—racial and religious—is present. Similarly, the data for Türkiye in Figure 4 and Figure 2 confirm our expectation for only religiously dissimilar individuals. From 2006 to 2019, income inequality went up (39.6 to 41.9), and religious social acceptance moved in the opposite direction (66.6% to 56.4%). In contrast to both the United States and Türkiye, the data for South Africa in Figure 4 and Figure 3 do not support our expectation that a negative relationship exists between income inequality and social acceptance, and this finding applies to every dimension of social acceptance—racial, immigrant/foreign worker, and religious. Also worth noting is that Figure 4 shows that income inequality in South Africa is especially elevated, ranging from a low of 57.8 to a high of 64.8.

One possible explanation for these results is that no meaningful relationship exists between income inequality and social acceptance, at least in the United States, Türkiye, and South Africa. The implication of this explanation is that Contact Theory is inadequate as a framework for understanding these variables and how they might relate. Another possible explanation, though, is that these variables do, in fact, have a relationship but that our measures for them are problematic. For instance, our measure for income inequality may not be the best option for getting at the "unequal status" aspect of the theory we use in this paper. Analyzing these topics with other sources of data may provide some clarification.

Conclusion

Key Findings

- Levels of social acceptance in the three countries of interest in this paper—the United States, Türkiye, and South Africa—vary significantly. What is more, the history of racial/ethnic conflict is an important factor in shaping these outcomes. When racial/ethnic conflicts increase, the social acceptance of racially/ethnically different people and immigrants/foreign workers decreases.
- The United States displayed the highest overall social acceptance. While racial social acceptance remained relatively stable, the social acceptance of immigrants/foreign workers went down slightly. In recent years, the United States also had a decline in religious social acceptance.
- Türkiye experienced a decrease in social acceptance toward racially/ethnically different people, immigrants/foreign workers, and religiously dissimilar individuals.
- South Africa exhibited an uptick in racial social acceptance but a meaningful drop in the social acceptance of immigrants/foreign workers and religiously dissimilar individuals.
- South Africa showed the highest overall income inequality. As for the relationship between income inequality and social acceptance, the results are mixed. On the whole, this relationship seems to be rather weak.

In short, our findings highlight the complex interplay between historical events, economic conditions, and social acceptance. Tensions linked to racial/ethnic conflicts, and, to a lesser extent, income inequality can impact people's attitudes toward those who are different from them. Further research is needed to explore the underlying mechanisms driving these trends and to develop effective strategies promoting social acceptance in diverse societies.

Future Research Directions

Considering the information in this paper, we see several avenues for future research. First, scholars could delve more deeply into the specific socio-historical events influencing social acceptance trends in the countries of interest here. Second, they could explore income inequality more fully, including possible mechanisms through which it impacts various dimensions of social acceptance. Third, they could investigate how social policies and interventions can promote greater social acceptance across diverse groups. Fourth, they could examine a wider range of countries, building on our limited sample. Finally, they could use other types of data to study the topics at issue in this paper, partly because self-reported data is susceptible to certain biases.

Acknowledgement

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