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"Just a Joke": Young Australian understandings of racism

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ABSTRACT

Lay understandings reflect the lived experience of racism, and our knowledge of these considerations assist with enhancing an appreciation of intergroup relations. Drawing on data from semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 30 school attendees from diverse backgrounds aged 14–22 years, conducted from December 2011 to January 2012 in Victoria, Australia, we critically examined their understandings of and experiences with racism. Data demonstrate the ambiguity of racism, while confirming that Australian youth from various racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds consistently conceptualise, explain, and classify racism, whilst minimising some forms of racism, including racist humour. Participants described racism through three primary domains: (a) Group versus Individual: racism stems from perceived differences, with individuals stereotyped as belonging to larger groups; (b) Actions versus Beliefs: individuals are classified as racist or non-racist according to their actions and beliefs; and (c) Exceptions, Exclusions and Minimisation: racism is frequently excused and minimised. The present research highlights the need for additional exploration of the nuances of racism in Australia from lay perspectives and provides clear evidence of the need to address racism in Australian society. Further developing the evidence base to understand the lived experience of racism in Australia could inform and support the design and evaluation of anti-racism and pro-diversity initiatives. Moreover, we hope that the present data can be drawn upon to enlighten the development of instruments to more accurately measure racist attitudes in Australian youth.

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1. Introduction

Enhancing scholarly understandings of how lay people conceptualise racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious difference, and identify racist speech and action, is critically important to reduce racism and promote alternate attitudes (Walton, Priest, & Paradies, 2013). The current study was conducted to explore perceptions of race and racism among young Victorians, so to enhance our understanding of the dynamics of racism, differential treatment due to perceived racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious group membership, and its converse, racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious acceptance. We did not set out to test hypotheses or an underlying theory; rather, we sought to generate and develop a conceptual and experiential understanding of racism in Australia, using a qualitative approach. The potential of qualitative research to be an integral, in depth, and unobtrusive component of instrument development has been highlighted previously (Walton et al., 2013). The conceptualisations provided by participants were therefore also intended to inform an attitudinal measure of racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious acceptance, to be developed in subsequent work (see Grigg & Manderson, 2015).

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Despite its pervasiveness in everyday language, there is no academic consensus on what characterises racism, and most research fails to adequately define racism (Brondolo, Gallo, & Myers, 2009; Paradies, 2006a). Theories of racism vary from those understanding racism as inevitable, to those attributing racism to personality characteristics, to those proposing racism to be a product of societal norms and discourse. Racism has also been studied from both the perspective of the reflecting perpetrator and of the perceiving victim. In this sense, perceived racism refers to the subjective experience of racism, prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999).

In its most basic form, racism refers to differential treatment due to the perceived racial membership of an individual or group based on stereotypic characteristics (Paradies, 2006b; Phelan, Link, & Dovidio, 2008). The term can also be applied more extensively to cultural and ethnic group differences, and contemporary definitions of racism have expanded to include religious affiliation, with racialisation of religion considered especially important in Australia (Contrada et al., 2001; Dunn, Klocker, & Salabay, 2007). Broadly, racism can be defined as any behaviours, beliefs, or attitudes that underlie inequalities across groups and disadvantage less dominant, or advantage dominant, groups, with the inequitable distribution of power being essential for such racism and the consequent stigma (Fiske, 1993; Link & Phelan, 2001; Paradies et al., 2013; Phelan et al., 2008; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

Racism is expressed through stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. Racist beliefs are viewed as cognition (i.e., stereotyping); racist emotions and attitudes as affect (i.e., prejudice); and the enactment of racist laws, norms, and practices as behaviour (i.e., discrimination) (Paradies, 2006a; Quillian, Cook, & Massey, 2006). Therefore, racism, as broadly defined in the academic literature, includes any cognition, affective state, or behaviour that advances the differential treatment of individuals or groups due to their racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious background. Unlike other conceptualisations that view racism as existing only from members of dominant to oppressed groups, this definition acknowledges that racism is not unidirectional. Both dominant and minority groups can be targeted, and racism may occur between members of a different group (inter-racial racism) or the same group (intra-racial racism).

The phenomenon is manifested at all levels of society, from government policies to organisational structures, intergroup and interpersonal relations, and intraindividual attitudes (Sanson et al., 1998). Consequently, racism needs to be understood and addressed at all levels. Although systemic racism, as reflected by structural inequalities, can be addressed to an extent by legislation and societal interventions, the underlying mechanisms of interpersonal racism and related intraindividual attitudes are less well appreciated, and effective interventions are limited.

Racist attitudes, like all attitudes, form from a young age and, depending on the environment, thrive or diminish (Lasker, 1929; Nesdale, 2011). Three ordered stages of racial attitude development have been proposed: awareness, self-identification, and attitude formation. Racial awareness denotes the ability to distinguish between members of different racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups according to societal norms (e.g., skin colour) (Byrd, 2012). Self-identification refers to the capacity of an individual to identify their own racial, ethnic, cultural, and/or religious group membership (Byrd, 2012). Finally, racial attitude formation refers to the development of crystallised attitudes and beliefs about the characteristics associated with individuals from distinct racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups (Byrd, 2012). Children as young as four years are racially aware and racial self-identification and the capacity to perceive racism is firmly established by adolescence, but the development of crystallised racist attitudes appears to continue into adulthood (Aroian, 2012; Byrd, 2012; Nesdale, Griffith, Durkin, & Maass, 2005). To date there is no consensus on how young people acquire and maintain racist attitudes throughout this formative developmental period, or of how youth conceptualise and experience racism.

However, as a complex social issue, a variety of explanations, perspectives, and theories of racism have been advanced, with evolving hypotheses appearing in distinct phases and forms across time and space. Correspondingly, but to a lesser extent, alternative measurement tools and techniques have been developed and utilised to assess understandings of racism. The prevalence and emergence of different theoretical orientations, and distinct theoretical explanations, has shifted in response to wider historical and social factors and the dominant psychological paradigm (Duckitt, 1992). Social circumstances and historical events interact with changes in epistemology, methods, and investigative techniques, encouraging these shifts. Alternate philosophies of racism have concentrated on varying causal factors, with no adequate general theories or integrative frameworks yet able to provide a comprehensive explanation of racism and its causes (Duckitt, 1992). Originating in the early 20th century, once scientific researchers began to question established beliefs of the racial inferiority of minority groups, racism research can be broadly viewed as stemming from three waves (Dovidio, 2001; Duckitt, 1992). In the first wave, from around the 1920s to 1950s, racism was assumed to reflect psychopathology stemming from irrational and unjustified thought processes; in the second, throughout the 1960s to 1970s, it was considered to be rooted in processes related to the development of social norms; the third and current wave, emerging in the late 1970s, emphasises the covert, often unconscious, and multidimensional nature of racism (Dovidio, 2001; Duckitt, 1992).

Contemporary forms of racism are often described by theories of racial ambivalence, which are characterised by the mutual coexistence of both positive and negative racial attitudes and of subtle and unintentional forms of bias. Such notions were developed in response to the objectionable nature of overt racism in contemporary societies (Dovidio, 2001; Duckitt, 1992). The theories of symbolic racism (Kinder & Sears, 1981), modern racism (McConahay, 1983), aversive racism (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1977; Kovel, 1970), and later subtle prejudice (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995), colour-blind racism (Neville, Lilly, Lee, Duran, & Browne, 2000), and racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007) are some notable examples. Stemming from these understandings of modern racism, cognitive psychology offered an important distinction between implicit and explicit attitudes, with implicit attitudes proposed to lack conscious awareness, unable to be directly perceived, unintentionally

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