



How “dark” personality traits and perceptions come together to predict racism in Australia



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ABSTRACT

This study provided initial insights into the shape of racism in Australia from the perspective of personality psychology. In this study ($N = 201$) racism towards Anglo-Australians and Middle-Easterners was assessed in relation to the Dark Triad traits (i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, & Machiavellianism), social dominance, authoritarianism, and perceptions of whether the world was dangerous/competitive. While the groups did not differ in the Dark Triad traits, Middle-Easterners did see the world as more dangerous and were more authoritarian than Anglo-Australians. There was evidence of an in-group/out-group bias, but this was localized to ratings of Middle-Easterners. Racism towards Anglo-Australians by Middle-Easterners appears to be mostly associated with perceiving the world as a dangerous and competitive place whereas racism in the reverse appears to be associated with perceptions of dangerous world, authoritarianism, and social dominance. Importantly, the Dark Triad traits exerted little influence in predicting racism but did predict these proximal factors suggesting those who are racist are not necessarily “evil” but, instead, have some latent biases about how they see the world that lead to racist tendencies.

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1. Introduction

Cronulla is a beachside suburb of Sydney, Australia. In 2005 it made international news when it was the site of a major race riot between Australians of Middle-Eastern and European (henceforth Anglo-Australians) backgrounds. This event, like 9–11 in America, has invigorated the study of racism (especially in regards to individuals of Arab heritage) to the public’s eye, and importantly, for this paper involved extensive hostility (including violent attacks) by members of both groups. As such, researchers have taken notice, providing a surge of new social psychological research on this topic (Bliuc, McGarty, Hartley, & Muntele Hendres, 2012; Duckitt, Callaghan, & Wagner, 2005; Hodson, Hogg, & MacInnis, 2009; Jones, 2013). However, to date there have been few attempts to understand racism in these two groups in Australia from a personality perspective. Thus, this study attempts to understand individual differences in racism towards and among Anglo-Australians and Middle-Easterners (or an in-group bias among these groups).

Before one gets into too much detail about the racist attitudes directed at any group, one should demonstrate whether or not a given group is actually different in some meaningful way.

Unfortunately, most work on racism and prejudice does not do this. This may be because it starts with a philosophical perspective and social agenda towards equality. Instead of assuming that all people are equal (as opposed to deserve equitable treatment in the eyes of the law and society), one can (and should) test this assumption using personality inventories. The implication by the racist individual is that the out-group is in some way “bad” and, therefore, deserving of discrimination (Allport, 1954). Individuals perceive out-groups as more homogenous relative to their in-group (Park & Myron, 1982) and derogate out-group members in order to increase collective self-esteem (Branscombe & Wann, 1994). What better way to assess if there is some truth to the racist’s attitudes than to compare individuals from different groups on the Dark Triad traits, an ostensible measure of the rate of which someone engages in socially undesirable acts. It would be good to go back to first principles (i.e., test implicit assumptions) and ask whether or not there is something real behind the racism directed towards Middle-Easterners or Anglo-Australians. By comparing rates of the Dark Triad traits in each group, this study hopes to empirically demonstrate that there is no strong, legitimate cause for this discrimination in Australia.

Insights from personality psychology suggest those who are disagreeable and adopt worldviews that involve competition and danger tend to be racist (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Sibley & Duckitt, 2010). However, most work has focused on disagreeableness as

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measured within the Big Five (i.e., extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness). The Dark Triad traits (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) are linked by disagreeableness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and have been implicated as predictors of racism in America with the traits linked to membership in an infamous racist organization, the Ku Klux Klan (Jones, 2013). The traits are linked to a number of dispositions that make a link to racism appear reasonable. They involve a need for dominance (Jones, 2013), a lack of empathy (Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013), and aggression (Jones & Paulhus, 2010), among other socially undesirable behaviors such as limited self-control/impulsivity (Jonason & Tost, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2011), short-term mating (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009), and a selfish/exploitive way of life (Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010). Social perceptions of these individuals coincide with these intra-personal correlates; the Dark Triad traits, especially psychopathy, are generally considered socially undesirable (Rauthmann, 2012)—with the exception of women who are seeking casual sex relationships who find these dark traits appealing (Aitken, Lyons, & Jonason, 2013). Therefore, given the generally antisocial and socially undesirable nature of the Dark Triad traits, they may relate to racism in as much as racism is an antisocial and socially undesirable attitude.

However, there is a more likely possibility given the nature of many “general” personality traits. The Dark Triad traits could be considered distal personality traits like the Big Five (McCrae & Costa, 1995). They are distal in as much as they are distant from predicting people’s behavior just as attitudes are distal in predicting behaviors. Attitudes do not directly predict behaviors, but instead, there must be the intervening factor of behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 2012). Racism may not operate directly through the Dark Triad, but, instead may actually be more strongly a function of proximal personality traits that act as the stronger correlates of racism. In this case, the degree to which someone desires to be socially dominant (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) over others and endorses authoritarian (Altemeyer, 1996) attitudes may act as proximal factors that predict racism in Australians as they have done in American (Jones, 2013) and New Zealand samples (Sibley & Duckitt, 2010). Indeed, personality traits such as Machiavellianism and self-esteem contribute little to explaining racism beyond social dominance and authoritarianism (McFarland & Adelson, 1996).

Social dominance and authoritarianism operate as personal ideological values about the manner by which societies should be structured and how individual should interact (Duckitt, Wagner, du Plessis, & Birum, 2002). For instance, a person who is high in social dominance desires to be in charge in social situations and is concerned with power. A person high in authoritarianism endorses conservative social views and feels that the social world should be organized into a hierarchical structure. Authoritarianism captures individual differences in preferences for the status quo (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Jones, 2013). Taken together, these act as motivational goals. In reference to racism, both might predict racism in the perceived dominant group (i.e., Anglo-Australians) because members of the group value their position of authority and resent apparent usurpers. To make sense of this, stepping back from humanity might be needed for some perspective. Lions (*Panthera leo*; Grisham, 2001), especially, and, to a lesser degree, chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*; Campbell, Fuentes, MacKinnon, Panger, & Bearder, 2007) have social systems and highly contingent on social dominance and reproductive success is tied to rank. Natural selection would have served members of these species (as with humans) to have cognitive biases for those who achieve status to want to maintain it. Therefore, social dominance and authoritarianism are expected to be correlated with racism towards Middle-Easterners by Anglo-Australians.

Beyond personality traits the manner by which individuals perceive the world should also exert some influence on the degree to which someone holds racist attitudes (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). Based on realistic conflict theory (Jackson, 1993) and integrated threat theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), it is those who feel they are in competition with one another that should express negative attitudes towards the out-group. That should translate into a correlation between whether one perceives the world as a competitive place being correlated with racism in both groups. In contrast, perceptions of the world being dangerous might only predict racism in Middle-Easterners (relative to Anglo-Australians). Middle-Easterners may have a different local and global experience that creates the impression that world is dangerous, thereby facilitating the “protective”¹ mechanisms of racism. Racism among Anglo-Australians may not be related to perceptions of a dangerous world as they lack such international ties.

And last, some ethnic differences are also expected. First, there might be generalized ethnic differences in the political personality traits. Part of authoritarianism might be an objection to progressivism (e.g., attitudes towards atheists and homosexual). This might translate into higher rates of authoritarianism among Middle-Easterners given their higher rates of religious values via Coptic Christianity and Islam (Norenzayan & Gervais, 2013). In contrast, Anglo-Australians are best described as generally agnostic if not outright atheist. Second, each group may perceive the world somewhat differently given their relative position in Australian society but also in relation to larger global patterns. It may be that as Middle-Easterners have stronger familial, ethnic, religious, and historical ties to areas of the world with conflict and war, they may be more likely to perceive the world as being dangerous. In addition, given the sheer numbers of each group in the Australian population, it would be reasonable to expect Middle-Easterners to have a stronger sense of a dangerous world but in both groups a greater sense of a dangerous world should predict racism directed towards the out-group member (Allport, 1954). Middle-Easterners, as a cultural minority and a group with direct ties to parts of the world with high rates of volatility, may perceive the world as more dangerous than Anglo-Australians.

Given some significant events in the “real-world”, researchers have re-invested themselves into understanding the causes of racism and prejudice. Traditionally, research has come from social psychologists who are concerned with how contextual factors influence the emergence (or not) of racist attitudes and discriminatory behavior. In contrast, a minority of this research has been done by personality psychologists arguing that personality traits and their related perceptions of the world may be predictors of racist attitudes. This study takes the approach of the latter group to understand racism in Australia.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Two hundred and one (83% female) Australians, aged between 17 and 55 ($M = 23.24$, $SD = 5.50$) who either labeled themselves as Anglo-Australian ($n = 120$) or Middle-Eastern ($n = 81$) participated in an online study about personality and prejudice. Participants were students in psychology at the University of Western Sydney. Participants were informed of the nature of the study, took a number of self-report measures, and reported on the above demographic details. Upon completion, participants were thanked and debriefed.

¹ Racism may be a system of beliefs that facilitates in-group cohesion, therefore, could be called “protective”.

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