



# 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”<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

## 2.2. Measures

The Short Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) is a concise measure of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. It contains 27 items asking participants to rate their agreement (1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 5 = *Strongly Agree*) with statements reflecting narcissism (e.g., “I have been compared to famous people.”), Machiavellianism (e.g., “Most people can be manipulated.”), and psychopathy (e.g., “I like to get revenge on authorities.”). Items were averaged to create indexes of Machiavellianism (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .73$ ), narcissism ( $\alpha = .60$ ), and psychopathy ( $\alpha = .75$ ).

A 12-item version of Altemeyer’s (1996) Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Sibley & Duckitt, 2010) was used. Participants indicated their level of agreement to items such as, “What our country really needs, instead of more ‘civil rights’ is a good dose of law and order,” on a 5-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*). By averaging the items, an authoritarianism index was created ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

A 10-item version of social dominance orientation (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) was used (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Sibley & Duckitt, 2010). Participants reported their agreement (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*) with statements like “No one group should dominate in society”. Items were averaged to create an index of social dominance ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

Beliefs that the world was a dangerous place was assessed with 10 items (Duckitt & Fisher, 2003). Each item asked participants how much they agreed (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*) with statements like “We live in dangerous society in which good, decent and moral people’s values and way of life are threatened and disrupted by bad people” and “Our country is NOT falling apart or rotting from within”. Items were averaged together to create an index of perceptions of a dangerous world ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

Beliefs that the world was a competitive place was assessed with eight items (Duckitt & Fisher, 2003). Each item asked participants how much they agreed (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*) with statements like “Money, wealth and luxury are what really count in life” and “One should give others the benefit of the doubt. Most people are trustworthy if you have faith in them”. Items were averaged together to create an index of perceptions of a competitive world ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

Australian-specific racism was assessed by asking participants (yes/no) whether they agreed with a series of eight statements (Duckitt et al., 2005). The items were made specific to enable ratings of Anglo-Australians and Middle-Easterners (order randomized). For instance, participants were presented with items such as “It really upsets me to hear anyone say something negative about Anglo-Australians [Middle-Easterners]” (reversed-scored). Items were summed to create indexes of racial biases towards Middle-Easterners ( $\alpha = .70$ ) and Anglo-Australians ( $\alpha = .55$ ).

## 3. Results

Table 1 contains descriptive statistics and correlations for the variables in the study. Machiavellianism was associated with perceptions of a dangerous and competitive world, authoritarianism and social dominance, and unfavorable ratings of both ethnic groups. Narcissism was associated with perceptions of a dangerous and competitive world and authoritarianism and social dominance. Psychopathy was associated with perceptions of a dangerous and competitive world, authoritarianism and social dominance, and unfavorable ratings of Middle-Easterners only.

Variables were tested in conceptual clusters of the Dark Triad traits, political personality traits, perceptions of the world, and judgments of members of each group. Four MANOVAs were run to detect ethnic differences in all of the predictors. The ethnic groups did not differ on the Dark Triad traits ( $\Lambda = .97$ ,  $F(3, 197) = 2.17$ ,  $p < .10$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ ). There was a multivariate main effect on perceptions ( $\Lambda = .96$ ,  $F(2, 198) = 3.82$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ ), localized to perceptions of a dangerous world ( $F(1, 200) = 3.00$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ ), suggesting Middle-Easterners ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ) perceived the world as more dangerous than Anglo-Australians ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ). There was a multivariate main effect on political personality traits ( $\Lambda = .89$ ,  $F(2, 198) = 12.50$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .11$ ), localized to Right-Wing Authoritarianism ( $F(1, 200) = 6.33$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .09$ ), suggesting Middle-Easterners ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ) were more authoritarian than Anglo-Australians ( $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ). And last, there was a multivariate main effect on racism scores ( $\Lambda = .83$ ,  $F(2, 198) = 19.69$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .17$ ), localized to judgments of Middle-Easterners ( $F(1, 200) = 39.51$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .17$ ), suggesting Middle-Easterners ( $M = 1.90$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ) rated their own group with much less prejudice than Anglo-Australians ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 2.57$ ), not such effect existed in judgments of Anglo-Australians.

Given the overlap among the Dark Triad traits, five multiple regressions were run on each of the remaining variables to control for this. Machiavellianism predicted perceptions of a dangerous ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $t = 2.72$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and competitive world ( $\beta = .39$ ,  $t = 6.38$ ,  $p < .01$ ), authoritarianism ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $t = 2.55$ ,  $p < .05$ ), social dominance ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $t = 3.68$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and ratings of Middle-Easterners ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $t = 2.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Narcissism predicted authoritarianism ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $t = 2.85$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and social dominance ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $t = 2.22$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Psychopathy predicted perceptions of a competitive world ( $\beta = .39$ ,  $t = 6.03$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and ratings of Anglo-Australians ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $t = 3.65$ ,  $p < .01$ ). To assess whether the Dark Triad traits explained additional variance above authoritarianism, social dominance, and perceptions of the world, two hierarchical multiple regressions were run. In neither ratings of Middle-Easterners ( $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ) or in Anglo-Australians ( $\Delta R^2 = .03$ ), albeit approaching significance in the latter case ( $p = .06$ ); an effect driven by psychopathy ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $t = 2.65$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics and overall, zero-order correlations among study variables.

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Machiavellianism	2.80 (0.58)	–								
2. Narcissism	2.67 (0.59)	.27**								
3. Psychopathy	1.98 (0.62)	.52**	.42**							
4. Dangerous World	3.04 (0.65)	.19**	.02	.07						
5. Competitive World	2.17 (0.58)	.60**	.31**	.60**	.16*					
6. Right-Wing Authoritarian	2.68 (0.60)	.19**	.22**	.06	.48**	.20**				
7. Social dominance orientation	2.11 (0.61)	.39**	.29**	.34**	.20**	.50**	.39**			
8. Ratings of Middle-Easterners	3.11 (2.43)	.23*	.11	.21**	.20**	.34**	.11	.30**		
9. Ratings of Anglo-Australians	2.53 (1.62)	.14	.07	.29**	.13	.22**	–.11	.14	.35**	

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table 2**  
Associations between personality traits and perceptions of the world with racism towards Middle-Easterners (ME) and Anglo-Australians (AA) in participants from those groups.

	<i>r</i> ( $\beta$ )			
	Anglo-Australians		Middle-Easterners	
	ME	AA	ME	AA
1. Machiavellianism	.35** (–.03)	.16 (–.10)	.15 (–.01)	.20 (.13)
2. Narcissism	.21* (.05)	.12 (–.12)	.03 (–.09)	.09 (.09)
3. Psychopathy	.19* (.16)	.22 (.35*)	.40** (.22)	.32** (–.19)
4. Dangerous World	.43** (.24*)	.22* (.17)	.04 (.05)	.10 (.24**)
5. Competitive World	.42** (–.04)	.17 (.27)	.29** (.23)	.32** (.24**)
6. Right-Wing Authoritarian	.40** (.24*)	–.00 (–.18)	–.18 (–.04)	–.05 (.12)
7. Social dominance orientation	.41** (.25*)	.26** (–.12)	–.05 (.01)	.12 (.15)

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

However, it is important to examine group-specific patterns to detect in-group and out-group effects. Table 2 contains the associations between each of these factors for ratings of each group by members of those same groups. In this case, the overlap among the Dark Triad traits, political personality traits, and perceptions of the world is controlled for to simultaneously test whether the Dark Triad traits account for unique variance in racism above well-established measures. Racism towards Middle-Easterners by Anglo-Australians appears correlated with all the predictors but mostly by perceptions of a competitive world, an authoritarian ideology, and a social dominance orientation. Racism towards Anglo-Australians by Middle-Easterners was related to perceptions of a competitive and a dangerous world. While there was little evidence of in-group biases here (i.e., negative correlations), those high in psychopathy in each group rated their own groups unfavorably.

#### 4. Discussion

Modern social-personality psychology is primarily concerned with the interplay of the person and the situation (e.g., Kenrick et al., 2002). However, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Jones, 2013; Sibley & Duckitt, 2010) the study of racism and prejudice—a topic that is quintessentially social psychology's domain—has focused mostly on contextual factors and the reduction of said phenomena. Regardless of why this might be, it is essential to start to understand the other side of this equation. In this study, racism in Australia was put under a microscope to better understand how personality and perceptions of the world come together to account for racism. This study provided some initial evidence of what might be behind the current racial tensions in Australia (and perhaps abroad).

First, this study attempted to dispel any ideas that racist attitudes or prejudice might have some evidentiary validity between the two groups investigated. There were no differences between Anglo-Australians and Middle-Easterners on the Dark Triad traits. Differences here might suggest one group or the other is actually “deserving” of the prejudices tied to them. However, as this was not the case, one can (and should) dispel any reasonable justification to maintain racist attitudes from an empirical stand point, leaving only actual biases to blame. As useful as this is, few attempts have been made to dispel such ideas. The evidence here presents only one test of potential differences; more work is needed to more fully explore this, but should do so from a theoretical paradigm instead of merely documenting differences. This is not to say that these two groups do not differ at all. Middle-Easterners scored higher than Anglo-Australians in perceptions of a dangerous world and adopting an authoritarian ideology. The first may be related to local and global events in regards to their cultural group and a relatively greater religiousness than Anglo-Australians.

Second, the Dark Triad traits appear to be rather weakly linked to unfavorable attitudes to both groups when taking into account the more proximal factors. Overall, psychopathy predicted unfavorable ratings of Anglo-Australians whereas Machiavellianism predicted unfavorable attitudes towards Middle-Easterners. Instead, what might be the case is that racist attitudes are predicted by the proximal factors and those proximal factors are somewhat predicted by the Dark Triad traits. Indeed, the Dark Triad traits each had unique links to the constellation of political variables examined herein, with Machiavellianism being associated with the greater proportion of them.

Third, some insight was gained about the way different personality traits might be responsible for racism by and directed towards others. Racism towards Middle-Easterners by Anglo-Australians appears to be correlated with the all the measures, but after controlling for shared variance, this manifestation of racism was related to perceptions of the world as competitive, authoritarianism, and social dominance. As the (arguably) dominant group in Australia, Anglo-Australians have a vested and deep evolutionary need to maintain their position. Given the reproductive, survival, and social benefits of being in charge, it is not surprising that the dominant group wishes to maintain that position. They may use racism as mechanisms of oppression directed towards apparent usurpers or threats to that position.

More limited, potentially by sample size, were predictors of racism in the reverse. Racism by Middle-Easterners directed towards Anglo-Australians was primarily associated with perceptions that the world is dangerous and competitive. Perceptions of the world being competitive and dangerous may be manifestations of a generalized fearfulness about the world. This fearfulness may facilitate the “protective” mechanism of racism. This fearfulness may be created by at least two factors in Australia. First, the Australian way of life (e.g., alcohol consumption, gender equality, and religious tolerance/indifference) may be a direct affront to the socioreligious sentiments of Arab and Middle-Eastern cultures. It may give the impression that their way of life is under threat. Second, as a minority group in Australia, those of Middle-Eastern descent may feel experience overt and covert racism that Anglo-Australians are less familiar with. Third, events from the actual Middle-East may contaminate the perceptions of those living in Australia; Australia is a relatively safe country as it stands. Nevertheless, actual danger or competitiveness may be what matters in predicting racism (Jackson, 1993; Stephan & Stephan, 2000); the accuracy of those judgments is secondary.

#### 5. Limitations and conclusions

The primary limitation of this study was its imbalance of Anglo-Australians to Middle-Easterners. While this is problematic in theory, this did not prohibit the detection of effects as predicted. Sec-

ond, the study examined racism and its predictors in a sample of college students only. College students may be less racist than the average population given exposure to members of different groups. Third, given the overlap between the Dark Triad traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and racism (Sibley & Duckitt, 2010) with the Big Five, future research should attempt to partial this variance. Fourth, this study only directly speaks to racism in Australia in two groups and can only indirectly speak to the larger phenomena of racism. Fifth, the measure of racism was a count of how many racist beliefs individuals hold, but it might have been better to measure racist behavior to reduce social desirability. Therefore, while this study was unique in its paradigm, its population, and focus, the study would be worth replicating with more rigorous methods, larger and more varied samples, and a wider range of ethnic groups.

Despite these limitations this study is one of the few studies examining racism using a personality psychology paradigm but, more importantly, one of even fewer that have examined racism in Australia itself. Racism in Australia is much like racism in America (Jones, 2013) and New Zealand (Sibley & Duckitt, 2010). It is down to social dominance, authoritarianism, and perceptions of the world as dangerous/competitive. However, these associations differ across the target and source of racism; effects that could be accounted for by social and evolutionary models.

#### Author's note

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