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# Contemporary Racism in Australia: The Experiences of Aborigines

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*In recent decades, social psychologists have suggested that contemporary racism is more subtle in nature than it had been in previous times. However, such theorizing has been from the perspective of the perpetrators. The present study follows a small number of other studies that have focused on the perspective of the victims of racism. It investigated the experiences of racism reported by 34 Aboriginal Australians during semi-structured, open-ended interviews. The data suggest that racism is experienced commonly and frequently by the participants and that much of it is overt or old-fashioned rather than subtle and modern. It is argued that if the data are reflective of what happens in intergroup encounters, social scientists may have embraced the theories of modern racism too readily. This may have contributed to the maintenance of social institutions that impact negatively on the minority populations in the community.*

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The plethora of writings related to racism across the various disciplines encompassed by the social sciences is testament to the fact that racism remains a significant issue in the world today. Despite various political reforms in the countries that make up the Western world, racism persists, often, but not always, manifesting in more covert and subtle ways than in by-gone times. Indeed, according to Pettigrew (1989), the overt expression of racism has become increasingly socially unacceptable, whereas Edsall and Edsall (1992) similarly claim that there has been a public repudiation of racism and a stigmatization of overtly racist expression. Such observations have stimulated social psychologists to proffer various accounts of both the changing nature of racism and the reasons why it persists (e.g., Dovidio & Gaertner, 1991; McConahay, 1982, 1986; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Sears, 1988; Sears & Kinder, 1971). However, in recent years, the systemic nature of racism has been rec-

ognized, and rather than focusing on the nature of racism, and the traits and characteristics of racist individuals and societies, some researchers have redirected their efforts to exploring the way racism is experienced by its targets and victims. For example, Essed (1991, 1992) has studied the everyday racism experienced by Black women in the Netherlands and the United States, and Feagin and Sikes (1994) have reported on the experiences of Black men in the United States. Similarly, some affected individuals (e.g., Durodoye, 1999; Wilbur, 1999) have recorded accounts of racism in their own life experiences. As argued by some social scientists (e.g., Harrison, 1976; Jones, 1997; Lalonde & Cameron, 1994), it is such accounts that to date have been missing from the epistemology of racism, and this exclusion may lead to a partial or distorted account of racism (Harding, 1991).

The purpose of this study is to further expand the investigation of the phenomenon of racism by using qualitative methods to investigate the range of experiences of racism reported by indigenous Australians. There is a significant level of prejudice in the Australian general community toward Aborigines, who have been described as "by far the most 'Outsider' group in Australian society" (Angelico, 1995, p. 253). Gaines and Reed (1995) argue that no Black person in the United States can be an American in the same sense as a White person, and it seems that no Aboriginal Australian can ever be an Australian in the same sense as a White Australian. Although it is more than 30 years since a referendum among the White community gave recognition to Aborigines as citizens, they still struggle to affirm their place as the original inhabitants of Australia, with their

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own complex cultures and spiritual relationship with the land. According to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (1994), the present-day disadvantaged position of indigenous Australians is reflected in the statistics relating to health (triple the national rate of infant mortality; disproportionate rates of diabetes, respiratory disorders, eye and ear diseases, and circulatory disorders; life expectancy that is 20 years lower than the non-indigenous population) and employment (3 times the national unemployment rate, average income one third less than the majority population).

Surprisingly, as Walker (1994) reports, studies on attitudes to Aborigines have been limited. One large study of 200 randomly selected adults in Townsville, Queensland (Larsen, 1978) found high levels of negativity, and Walker's own study of 257 respondents from 500 people randomly selected from the Perth (Western Australia's capital city) telephone directory provided results consistent with this. More recently, Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Sale (1999) reported on a study in which 1st-year university students' discussions about Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations were analyzed. Although this group of students scored low on scales of old-fashioned and modern racism and acknowledged that as a group Australian Aborigines were socially and economically disadvantaged, symbolic racism was clearly evident in their discourse. Most students expressed significant concerns about government spending on Aboriginal programs, and many believed that too much money was being spent on Aborigines unproductively. They also expressed firm objections to existing affirmative action policies for Aboriginal candidates in universities, arguing that these policies were inequitable and actually advantaged Aboriginal students when individual merit should be the only legitimate pathway to university education.

In another series of studies, Pedersen and Walker (1997) and Pedersen, Griffiths, Cantos, Bishop, and Walker (2000) surveyed people in Western Australia with regard to prejudice toward Aborigines. In the first study of Perth residents, they found that only one quarter of the respondents scored above the midpoint on the old-fashioned prejudice scale, whereas more than half did so on the modern prejudice scale. The second study was conducted both in Perth and in Kalgoorlie, a mining town in the Western Desert some 700 km from Perth. This study found that modern prejudice was more prevalent than old-fashioned prejudice in both locations, but more so in Kalgoorlie.

However, as stated above, rather than focus on the perpetrators of racism, this study is concerned with how racism is experienced by Aboriginal Australians. In an analysis of the relationship between Australian psychology and indigenous people, Davidson, Sanson, and Gridley (2000) suggest that psychologists should exam-

ine how their work and training condone and contribute to the everyday racism experienced by Indigenous people. To do this, it is necessary to acknowledge that there is a perspective on racism other than that of the dominant groups in society and to become aware of the range of racism that members of the indigenous community experience on a daily basis. In particular, as a discipline that is concerned with issues of social justice, psychologists need to listen to the indigenous narrative, acknowledge the importance of the knowledge of racism held by indigenous people, and incorporate this into their theorizing about racism. It is to this end that this study was conducted.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

When the term "Aborigine" is used in an Australian context, it refers to a broad range of people. According to the Australian Federal Government, an Aborigine is a person of Aboriginal descent who identifies as an Aborigine and is accepted as such by the community in which he/she lives (Slattery, 1987). This study focused on just one subgroup of the Aboriginal population: the urbanized Aboriginal population of Melbourne, who refer to themselves as *Koori* people.

A nonprobability sampling technique that involved snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. The sample size was determined by redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), that is, the sampling and data collection continued until the data collected were repetitive and further sampling and data collection were deemed unlikely to provide additional insights. In all, 34 Koories, 18 women and 16 men, were interviewed. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 58 years, with a mean of 36.6 years and a standard deviation of 12.8.

### *Procedure*

This study was concerned with how individuals experience racism and how they respond to those experiences. These concepts are not well-suited to quantification. Indeed, Reubsaet, Kropman, and van Mulier (1982, cited by Essed, 1991, p. 62) have shown that experiences of racism are difficult to define, and thus, questions about such experiences are open to different interpretations. The primary data for this investigation were derived from narratives collected through in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews were chosen to access the contextual richness of the participants' experiences. The aim was to give the participants the opportunity to describe the experiences that they interpreted to be racist and to provide the opportunity for them to qualify their statements and to elaborate on their explanations. Following Finch's (1993) suggestions on how to avoid

relative power relationships influencing such data collection, the interviews were conducted on the participants' own "territory" (i.e., at community centers and meeting places, or in their homes). Interviews were audiotaped so respondents could talk informally in a relaxed atmosphere.

The interviews were open-ended and semi-structured in nature but addressed the following issues:

1. The experiences the interviewee had that he or she considered to have been racist or to have had a racist component. When instances were offered, the participant was asked to elaborate as necessary so that the interviewer could ascertain the circumstances and aspects of the incident that the interviewee experienced as racism;
2. how the interviewee felt when the incident was experienced; and
3. how the interviewee responded to the particular experiences.

The interviews ranged from approximately 40 to 80 minutes; the preparation and debriefing stages meant that another 20 to 30 minutes were required for the process.

## RESULTS

Because the method of research was qualitative, the presentation of the results is necessarily descriptive. The challenge of the analysis of qualitative data is to "make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal" (Patton, 1990, pp. 371-372). The data were analyzed with NUD\*IST, a software package that allows the exploration of qualitative data by facilitating the classification of the data and enabling links between those classifications and patterns in the data to be investigated.

The data reflect on racist phenomena that typically had several aspects, including events, location, perpetrator, impact on the victim, and response of the victim. Here, though, the concern is with the range of experiences, and it is a taxonomy of perceived racist experiences derived from the data that is presented. The taxonomy was derived by first searching the data for themes and then coding the data to those themes. Subsequently, each theme area was explored for sub-themes and the data re-coded to these sub-themes. This process was iterative and was subjected to a number of measures to ensure its trustworthiness. These measures are outlined in the Discussion that follows the presentation of the findings.

The participants reported experiencing racism in a wide variety of forms across a variety of settings and from a variety of perpetrators. Generally, these experiences were shared across participants and could be categorized into four types. The first two categories encompass

racism that is predominantly individual in nature and that is expressed either through verbal or behavioral means. The third category encompasses discrimination, which, although often embedded in institutionalized practices, is perpetrated by individuals through the violation of accepted norms related to equality of treatment for all members of the community. The fourth category encompasses racism that occurs at a macro-level within the community and is institutional and cultural in nature rather than individual. In outlining the taxonomy below, examples from the data are used to provide a rich and "thick" description of the experience of racism in the lives of the Koori participants.

### *Verbal Racism*

The first category of racism derived from the data, verbal racism, was coded into two major subcategories. The first related to name-calling, whereas the second subcategory incorporated general remarks that were interpreted by the interviewee to be racist in some way. These subcategories are described below.

#### *NAME-CALLING*

Name-calling was reported to operate at three different levels. The first level involved any name-calling that included the word *Black*. This word appears to be the key element in determination of racism. At the second level, the word *Black* was combined with more general, obscene words. Finally, the third level of racist name-calling invoked words that in Australia particularly symbolize "Blackness" or colored people in a derogatory way. For example,

[at school] I just got called "Black slut," and names: "boong," "abo," "coon." (K04)<sup>1</sup>

I've been called a "nigger," "abo," and things like that, things that are said to other Aboriginal people, and I think in the 90s, you know, we shouldn't be dealing with that any more. (K05)

The significance of the word *Black* is demonstrated by the following extract from the interview with participant K19:

It depends on what's said. Like if, if it's not too verbally abusive and the context of "you Black . . ." You know? . . . You Black cunt. Black motherfucker." Just emphasizing the Black word, which they shouldn't. They can call me a "motherfucker." It just means [that] I'm a motherfucker. But they don't have to put the "Black" in front of it.

#### *REMARKS*

Many participants reported that they experienced other remarks that were interpreted as being racist.

These remarks were subcoded into seven subcategories, as follows:

*General overheard comments.* Occasionally remarks were made in conversations that did not specifically involve Koori people, but they were overheard and considered to be racist or to have some connotation of racism, even if they may not have been intended to be so. For example,

About 2 months ago we went to Alice Springs and on the train we had this one person who was giving us the history of Aboriginal culture, all the way from Adelaide to Alice Springs. . . . Yeah, and he was tellin' the people on the train the ways of the Blacks, that they were dirty and stink. (K33)

*Overheard comments.* Many interviewees reported that at various times they had had experiences of people talking to others about them, specifically in relation to their Aboriginality. That others were talking about them in such a way was considered to be racist. At other times, comments were not made directly to a Koori person but were made so that that person could hear. The targets interpreted this as a more deliberate form of racism than the general overheard comments described above.

Um, yeah I think there was one occasion, might have been in a shop I think, and this person didn't know how to express, I dunno. But to me it was directed to me. And in the shop, this woman said to the lady at the counter "Oh, something smells in here." And there was no smell at all, 'cos it was a kids store. (K29)

*Deliberate direct comments.* Sometimes perpetrators of racism made specific comments that contained a negative connotation or a derogatory message directly targeting Koori people. That message implied that the individual was inferior or undeserving in some way because of his or her Aboriginality. For example, K12 recounted her experiences with the police after reporting that she had been raped by two men:

I reported it to the coppers, and um, and I had one female copper stare at me in the face, and she told me that I loved it, and that being Black, and I quote, "being Black, I asked for it," and "I was that drunk, how the hell do I know that I was raped?"

*Jokes and taunts.* Often remarks or jokes made about Koories were meant to be funny but were not seen as such by Koories. Rather, they were interpreted as being racist, as detailed in the following instance:

Last week, um, one of our [football] trainers made some racist remarks. . . . One of the trainers, and he was taking it as a joke. You know? But some of the boys didn't take it as a joke. Things like that happen. (K05)

Other "smart" comments were used to play on the target's sense of self but in a tangential manner through embodiment in sarcasm or teasing. They were based on stereotypes that had an element of fact or a tenuous connection with fact. They ranged from childhood teasing to adolescent teasing to the cruel taunts of the police experienced by K13 in relation to being in police custody:

Oh, you know, getting like . . . "leave your shoelaces on so he can hang himself" or "is he dead yet?" and that sort of thing.<sup>2</sup>

*Comments meant to be hurtful.* Another level of comment was more directly and openly aimed to hurt the target. Of interest, many such comments invoked the individual's mother and attached negative comments as a tool to hurt. For example, K04 reported on her experience:

And they'd say, "at least my mum is not Black" . . . But you know, they just kept saying about mum. There is no need for it. You know? Mum wasn't even part of the conversation.

*Intimidating comments.* These types of remarks were reported as emanating from those in authority. They have an implied or indirect threat to the Koori individuals, who have historically been vulnerable to such authority. In one instance, the police were involved:

Some of our aunties . . . were in the lock up over there. The police were saying all these really rude things to 'em. About their bodies and things. You know? Telling them like they wanted to . . . And everything. (K26)

*Threats.* Threats encompassed direct comments that were meant to intimidate a person by implying that some kind of legal action would follow. They also were based on a perceived vulnerability based on race, which may be historical in nature. K29 described how she was threatened by the police:

And the copper just walked up to me and started screaming words at me. And he says, "oh I'm gonna have this place cleaned out and I'm gonna have these kids taken away from you." . . . And he said "if you little Black bastards move," he said, "I'll shoot you." And the police-woman, she goes, "he'll do it, he'll do it."

#### *Behavioral Racism*

The second category of racism derived from the data is behavioral in nature. The types of behaviors described can be summarized as follows: ignoring, avoiding, looking, patronization, segregation, harassment, assault, and denial of identity. Each of these is outlined below, with appropriate examples drawn from the data.



### IGNORING

According to the data, ignoring took the form of failing to respond to an individual in interpersonal situations. This was interpreted to be on the basis of Aboriginality and associated stereotyped inferiority. For example,

I remember I went up to the police station up here once to [register] a car . . . And after about 45 minutes of just standing there, any way, I said, "excuse me lady, I've been here bout 30 minutes, 40 minutes." And she says, "the only reason I didn't see you was because you're not standing under the light." (K23)

### AVOIDING

Avoiding can take a number of forms but the examples provided by participants can be considered as being either personal or a more general avoidance of Koories. Participants reported instances in which other members of the community had avoided sitting next to them on public transport, a situation in which people are generally crowded together.

They sit really on the edge of the chair, like they are going to get, like the colour is going to come off and get on them. (K01)

But such avoidance also occurred in social situations, such as during coffee breaks at work or in public spaces such as the zoo.

We went to the zoo yesterday, and every time we went up to have a look at the animals, right, there would be little school groups there, and there would be mothers with prams there. . . . As soon as we got up to have a look, "come on kids," and they moved away real quick. You know? . . . And they sort of see us, walk away, and you see them veer up to the other side of the road. (K11)

### LOOKING

This category is used to describe occurrences in which the participants felt that they had been looked at either directly or indirectly because of their race. Direct experiences of being looked at were those in which the individual was aware of being stared at or watched. The data suggest that the interpretation of racism depends on more than being looked at. Often it was the attribution of racist intentions or thoughts to the person looking at the interviewee that was critical. In the following example, the interviewee explains this process:

The way you like get on a train, go sit down next to someone an' they look at you, an' "Oh yeah, Abo. He's a no-hoper, just like the rest of them." . . . Yeah, you can just tell by the expression on their face. Oh yeah, I don't think they think nothin' of me an' so. (K31)

Experiences of being looked at also related to perceptions that someone was watching, although there may have been no direct evidence that this was happening. It was a *feeling* that one was being watched because of one's Aboriginality. Furthermore, this feeling was often verified, as K16 demonstrated:

I get the feelin'. I could be sitting there, and I know someone's lookin' at me. You turn around and you see 'em staring and they just turn away. They won't sit there and stare at you. But they'll be staring and looking. You get that feelin', the feeling is just there, you feel it in the body, and you turn around and you can bet there's someone looking.

### PATRONIZATION

Patronizing behavior occurs when people are treated as if they are inferior. When it was experienced by the interviewees, they attributed it to their Aboriginality. Although patronization may be perpetrated through the verbal medium, it is treated here as behavioral in nature because it relates to *how things are done or said*: It is the perceived quality of communication rather than the content of messages that makes an action patronizing. Such patronization from non-Aboriginal toward Aboriginal people can be perpetrated unintentionally, as the following example demonstrates:

When I was driving a truck, there was this bloke, and I was telling him where I was going to go for the next job, and he said, "hang on a minute" and he went away and came back with this map. And I was really offended by it, and I said, "what is this for?" And he said, "oh this is just to help get to this job, you know, where to go." I said, "what do you think I am? Stupid?" You know? . . . He was trying to be helpful, because I was a Black. Because I was Black, that I couldn't work out where the streets were. I said, "look I've got a Melways<sup>3</sup> here." He said, "I'm just trying to help you." He didn't help me he just made me bloody wild. (K03)

### SEGREGATION

Segregation is the practice of separating one group of people from another because they are different in some way. Although this may have occurred more formally in the past, interviewees suggest that it still may be occurring in some circumstances. Participants spoke of formal and informal attempts to separate Koorie people from others. For example, in the general community, K17, among others, found that parents of other children attempted to keep their children away from her:

I guess you . . . just the way they talk to you, and you know, I had a couple of good mates too. You know? White blokes. And, um, their parents used to say, "keep away from them"—keep away from us.

*HARASSMENT*

This subcategory encompasses instances in which people reported being harassed on a repeated and unnecessary basis because of their Aboriginality. It was particularly perpetrated by the police, who in some instances were reported as using their authority to intimidate individuals. This was seen as being intrusive in the day-to-day lives of the interviewees and an infringement of their rights to lead a "normal" life. For example,

[the police are] always harassing and pickin' me up. . . . Harass me. "Jump in the car and come with us."  
(K20)

According to the data other harassment occurred when individuals were required to show the contents of their bag, show their driver's license or motor vehicle registration, or to be searched. One interviewee noted another style of harassment that actually occurred during the interview,

Some divi van<sup>4</sup> guys just went past then. . . . Cruise past, an' if they know it's a Koori house, they go real slow an' they look an just, see what's goin' on. Come past real slow. (K31)

*ASSAULT*

This subcategory encompasses instances in which participants reported physical assault, believed to be based on their Aboriginality. The range of examples is broad but in the main it is dominated by two areas: the school system and interactions with the police.

At school, both teachers and peers were reported as being sources of assaults. Koories in the past experienced physical punishments from teachers, which the participants recalled as being based on racism. Participants also reported physical assaults, ranging from spitting, hitting, and punching through to bashings, by peers, both in the past and at present. For example,

And, 'cos they found out that he was Aboriginal at school, they all pickin' on him ever since, and 'cos there are no other Aboriginal kids out there. Since he said that he was, a lot of kids been picking on him, and lately he's been getting bashed. (K24)

The interviewees also described a tradition of brutality among the police that from their own living experiences as persisted. Thus, although many older interviewees recalled being physically assaulted by the police in the past, many examples of such assaults also were provided by younger interviewees. K05 pointed out that assaults from police are reported as being almost the norm:

No Black that I know has got it easy. If they get picked up by the police, they always get a bashing.

Assaults against the participants also were reported to occur in other circumstances within the broader community, for example, at sports grounds, in hotels, and in the street. Several interviewees mentioned attacks by groups described as Ku Klux Klan members.

*DENIAL OF IDENTITY*

Another area in which some participants reported racism was that related to the acceptance of their Koori identity. This was particularly important for those who did not appear by skin color to be Aboriginal yet by their ancestry and social ties are part of the Koori community. This area consisted of two separate facets. First, there were instances in which White people, usually bureaucrats, refused to accept the individual's identity:

Like, I filled out a form which says "are you Aboriginal?" and I ticked it "yes" and then I seen the form again. Whoever I handed it to crossed it out and put on "no." (K13)

Second, two interviewees reported that they had their Koori identity concealed from them by their parents. One, K12, was adopted by a White couple and as she grew up was told that she was a New Zealand Maori to prevent her from searching for her biological parents in Australia. K15 also was brought up to believe that he was a Maori, until at the age of 15 years his ailing grandfather told him that the family was really Koori. This concealment was in fact a protection against racism rather than racism itself.

*Discrimination*

The third category of racist experience identified, after verbal and behavioral racism, is discrimination. Underlying all racism is an element of differential treatment of people because of their race. Following Allport (1954), discrimination can be conceptualized as denying "individuals or groups of people equality of treatment they may wish" (p. 51). On one hand, it can be seen to occur when a group of people is treated as inferior or unworthy and is denied opportunities that are available to others in the community. Thus, unexpected, unreasonable, and unnecessary denial, restriction, and exclusion are examples of discrimination. On the other hand, discrimination also can occur when people from one particular group are the recipients of excessive, biased, and unnecessary punitive measures, such as the application of rules or the law. Both types of discrimination were strongly evident in the data.

*DENIAL, RESTRICTION, AND EXCLUSION*

The first of these kinds of discrimination encompasses denial of equal treatment, resulting in individuals being unable to enjoy the “normal” things of life. Many participants (91%) reported instances in which they had been denied something that social norms in the broader society would suggest that they should have. A simple example is provided by K01, who spoke of the denial of the opportunity to sit down on the school bus imposed by White peers:

And um the buses, you know the kids, I mean we had to stand up most of the way because they reckoned that Blackfellas didn't have the right to sit down.

[Interviewer] So who decided that, the driver?  
No, the kids! The White kids.

A broad range of actions and events that were perceived to be denying or restrictive was evident in the data. These actions included being allocated inferior housing by the government housing authority,

I don't know, like sometimes I feel the Ministry of Housing, they give us the houses the White man wouldn't live in [K01],

being refused entry into hotels,

I actually went to a pub, the Croxton Hotel. They barred us at the door. I said, “what are you barring me for?” He said, “oh, it's your shirt, I don't like your shirt.” I said, “you gotta be bloody kiddin' mate.” And they said, “no you're not comin' in here, see you later” . . . I said, “look the bloody bloke there's got shorts on, he got shorts on, no socks and a pair of runners.” He just wouldn't . . . “Sorry, I'm not lettin' you in.” (K16)

being refused service in shops or being served last,

Umm, you know I've stood there and seen my grandkids stand at an ice-cream parlor and wait for an ice cream and White people are coming and going with their kids” [K22],

being denied housing or motel accommodation,

An Aborigine goes there and asks if there's a room, and there's always some excuse. But if you ring up, you got a room. As soon as you turn up, you haven't got a room. That's ridiculous. That's where there should be a law against that. (K23)

and being excluded from labor market and educational opportunities,

When you do get jobs—even though you know that you get on the job experience, you can't go up, you just stay in that line. . . . I had this thing, I was there 6 months. Along come blokes, they been there 2 weeks, 3 weeks, and they get a higher position.

[Interviewer] So they get promoted ahead of you?  
Yeah, always, always. A hell of a lot. (K23)

*OVER-APPLICATION OF THE LAW,  
RULES, AND PUNISHMENT*

The second type of discrimination was evidenced in the reports by interviewees of instances in which they perceived they had experienced discriminatory application of the law, rules, or punishments. This sometimes was related to, or followed on from, harassment by the police but also was experienced more generally across the range of activities in which people were engaged. For example, when in traffic, the interviewees believed that they were discriminated against, again, by the police. Participants talked of police stopping cars driven by Koories and eventually having to find some minor offense, such as driving a car with a bald tire, to justify the time taken up. This discriminatory action by the police seems to have impacted on both male and female drivers as well as younger and older drivers. Such events were especially common if the car being driven was expensive or new:

You got a flash car, then “boom!” straight on to you. . . . You don't look right in it and “where you gonna get the money to buy this?” They ask you all these questions. You could've won Tattsлото. Money has got nothing to do with the police. “Where's that car's registration” . . . Black face, full on. They see you running around in a big flash car, they think “Bingo! I'll have this one.” (K17)

That this was viewed as discriminatory by the interviewees is not only evidenced by the references to Black faces above but also by the perception that the same thing would not happen to a White person:

Yeah, this is it. This is the way it goes. Hell, the White man goes away for about 15 years like I did and he drove back in town he wouldn't get pulled up, it would be me. (K17)

Participants also perceived this kind of discrimination to occur in sport, in hotels, in schools, and in general community settings. For example, in sports,

You see kids playing basketball and you know being called Black and all this kind of stuff, and when they go to the tribunal we always lose. You know? We're always put out. I don't know if it was a deliberate thing, because the kids were too good for 'em. But it always happens. . . . Yeah, at the end of the day is, when there's an

investigation into it, the blokes are always wrong. I've never seen it come out yet where it hasn't been the Blackfella's fault. (K16)

and on public transport,

We had money to buy a [train] ticket, but there was no booths open. I think it was a Sunday. . . . We were the last two to walk out. . . . Next thing you know, the coppers straight away turn on their car, well drive with us as we're walking. "Hey boys, come over here. Where's your tickets?" "Oh, um, booths, ticket booths weren't open at Heathmont and Ringwood Station." He says, "Why?" "We dunno why." "You got money to buy 'em?" "Yeah." "Oh, it's not good enough. Sorry, we will have to give you a fine." So that's \$105 fine on the spot, each of us. And at least 10 to 15 White people walked past before that, and you could just see them. You know, a few of 'em wouldn't have had tickets. If they had of checked all of 'em, well we would have been sweet, but straight away, I've gone off, like as soon as it happened. (K18)

#### *Macro-Level Racism*

The fourth category of racist experience identified from the data was racism that reportedly occurs at the macro-level of society. Although the majority of the actions described above were perpetrated by individuals and impinged at the individual level, there are many other types of events and issues that were reported by the interviewees to be racist. These operated at the macro-level and were generally more diffuse, anonymous, and intangible. Four broad subcategories of macro-level racism involved a lack of concern about indigenous people, a selective view of history in the mainstream society, the dominating nature of White culture, and finally, the level of misinformation about indigenous people and how this is perpetrated by the media.

##### *LACK OF CONCERN*

An overriding yet diffuse form of macro-level racism perceived by the interviewees is a lack of care by the mainstream community about the Aboriginal community. Not only was the wider community seen to not care about Aborigines but it also was seen to prefer that the Aboriginal community did not exist. Such feelings are encapsulated by K01:

They just don't want to face the fact that we do exist. . . . I think they just don't know. There is not enough out there to make people realize that we do exist in the Aboriginal community.

##### *SELECTIVE VIEW OF HISTORY*

Furthermore, a failure by the dominant society to recognize and accept the Aboriginal perspective on history, and to integrate it into the European understanding, gave rise to a perception of racism. This selective view of

history denies the fact that Aborigines occupied Australia before European colonization and were massacred as colonization progressed (see Reynolds, 2001) and also that Aboriginal children were removed from their families as a means of reducing the Aboriginal element of the population (see Manne, 2001). These issues are related to the dignity of the interviewees. For example,

I mean the government today, they just don't understand that we, as indigenous people, really, all we want is to be recognized that we are true Australians. . . . They should give us, you know, that dignity that we are the true, well they say, the true dinky-die Aussies. You know it's good to say that you are Australian, which we are proud to say. Well if you're bothered to say you are Australian, be proud of it, be proud of us, we were the people that were here first. (K01)

Even when the historical events and practices that have impacted negatively on the indigenous community are acknowledged, this history was perceived as being trivialized. For example, the removal of Aboriginal children from their parents was seen by K16 to be trivialized by correspondents to a newspaper letters section:

But I think there is a lot of racism in Australia. Quite a lot, because you only have to read through the papers in 50/50<sup>5</sup>. . . . I have read through there, and anything about Land Rights . . . you know, "they shouldn't get that." The children have been taken away—"they shouldn't worry about that." But they don't go back and know the effects of what happened.

The source of this racism is seen by the interviewees to be the education system, which fails to provide a more accurate view of history. For example, K28 argued that the school system as a whole does not address these issues:

The schools aren't doing, aren't told to break that stereotyping of us. Not teaching children about the true history and just, you know, our worth as a people. It's not there in the history books. I mean, the curriculum doesn't say that this is part of your learning or part of the teaching. They're electives.

##### *CULTURAL DOMINANCE*

Another broad theme of macro-level racism is what can be termed culture-related racism. According to Jones (1997), cultural racism operates through the cumulative effects of beliefs in essential racial differences that are suffused throughout the society via institutional structures, ideological beliefs, and personal everyday actions of people in the society. Those who hold a particular set of cultural values become advantaged, and those who do not are disadvantaged. Such effects persist across generations. Thus, aspects of one culture that



belong to the dominant racial group dominate aspects of other cultures.

Several respondents described the dominance of Western culture in Australia as a form of racism. This has been associated with a denial of the right or opportunity for Aboriginal people to practice aspects of their own culture and has resulted in a loss of important aspects of that culture, as the following example drawn from the data demonstrates:

They were told that they weren't allowed to huddle down on the mission. That was all part of the White man's structure. . . . So these things broke down a lot of our barriers that kept us strong, which then made our people weaker, because they were losing their tradition piece by piece. So by the time I've grown up, I've watched my elders disintegrate around me because of this White man rule and laws again. . . . I'm probably an angry person, because I've seen all this happen because I've seen what I end up with, which is no language, no culture, no nothing! (K02)

The limitations placed on the practice of aspects of indigenous culture have occurred in the context of the imposition of a dominant White culture. That this culture has been imposed was seen by the respondents as racist, but the fact that it does not meet the needs of the indigenous population also was seen as racist. For example, one participant talked of the cash economy being "pushed down the throats" of indigenous people, whereas another spoke of the need to "suck a White man's behind" to get what you want because "it is a White man's world." This White world and lifestyle is not always suitable for Aborigines. Participants mentioned aspects of Western culture such as language, diet, housing, and the economy as being unsuited to the Aboriginal way of life.

#### THE MEDIA AND MISINFORMATION

A final kind of diffuse macro-level racism relates to the perceived propensity of members of the wider community to believe in, and to perpetrate, misinformation about Aborigines and Aboriginal issues. Many interviewees argued that the media has a significant role in this process. It is seen both to discriminate against the Aboriginal community by selective reporting and to perpetuate stereotypes about Aborigines through its coverage of news and current affairs. The lack of veracity of the reporting on Koori affairs is pointed out by K21:

Well, people, they read something in the paper about Koories, um, whether it be the truth of what actually happened or not. But someone can read it that's never been involved in Koori activities and they see, and they think, "Oh—what were they thinking? Why should they get that?" But they don't know what we've gone through so

they can't really understand, 'cos those people in the media distort everything that they're told. I dunno, that's just my opinion. 'Cos I read a story and I know what's happening and I go "that's not true." Why didn't they say this, and why didn't they put that in as well?

In particular, through selective reporting, the media is seen as depicting Aboriginal people as dirty, drunks, destructive, and unable to live in Western-style housing:

I mean, at the moment, the TV and papers and stuff has been giving like, the Aboriginal people like up in Alice Springs. And what do they show up there? They show Aboriginal people in tin huts, drunk, you know, swearing and chucking bottles around. I watched the Today Tonight show about a week ago, and they showed Aboriginal youth, in, I think it was Townsville, smashing bottles just outside a pub. Now it's them, it's showing non-Aboriginal people out in the community what Blackfellas are really like. You know what I mean?

[Interviewer] So that's the only example that White people see?

Yeah, that's what I reckon, that's my opinion. They don't see Aboriginal people, you know, like we are here. What the paper does is put Aboriginal people down, seeing stuff like that out in the community there. (K05)

The selective nature of such reporting was seen as having two elements. Not only was it seen as being unrepresentative of life within the Koori community but it also was seen as singling out Koories from the rest of the population, which also has examples of behaviors that deviate from the norm.

#### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the racism experienced by Aborigines in Australia. It was based on the premise that racism occurs within a dynamic interactive system and because social scientists have largely ignored the victims' perspective in their analyses of racism, knowledge of racism has been incomplete.

The data indicate that the racism experienced by the Aboriginal participants is pervasive. There was substantial agreement among the interviewees that non-Aboriginal people hold negative stereotypes about Aborigines and that this is normative. These stereotypes are seen to be freely perpetuated in society by individuals and the media. In sum, these perceived stereotypes convey the message to the participants that they have no place in the "culturally superior" mainstream society.

The interpretation that stereotypes exist derives from and is reinforced by the racism reportedly experienced both directly and indirectly, individually and collectively, by participants. Verbal racism, through name-calling, insults, and other remarks that are direct and indirect,

purposefully racist and occasionally unintentionally racist, is widely reported. There is a special and strong emphasis on skin color associated with verbal racism. In addition, incorporated into the Australian version of the English language is a set of derogatory terms referring to Aborigines that are used as weapons of racism against them. Behavioral racism also was reported to be extensive. In the more extreme forms it involved physical violence but it was also frequently expressed through harassment, mainly by the police. This is not to say that more subtle forms of racism are not experienced. Many participants reported an awareness of being watched, of being avoided, of being talked about, and of being stereotyped all on the basis of race.

A range of perceived discriminatory practices also impacts heavily on Aboriginal people. Such discrimination was reported to affect core areas of life: employment prospects, educational opportunities, access to housing, and the ability to enjoy the "normal" things in life. Discrimination also means that Aboriginal people perceived themselves as being subjected to a disproportionate implementation of laws, regulation, and punishment. In essence, this range of discriminatory practices constitutes a complex of adverse treatments for the participants relative to the rest of the population.

Finally, at the societal level, institutional and cultural racism was reported by participants and experienced as interfering with their life chances. Some of the discrimination above is in effect institutionalized, but the dominance of White culture and its trappings limits the capacity of Aborigines to practice their culture and disrupts the integrity of their community.

In sum, the racism reportedly experienced by the participants in this study has the key features of the everyday racism described by Essed (1990, 1991). It constitutes a coherent complex of different kinds of verbal and physical behaviors, discrimination, and cultural domination and rejection that are experienced in diverse situations. In effect, these situations encompass all those that constitute everyday life: school, sport, shops, employment, public places, hotels, entertainment venues, transport, traffic, accommodation, and the socio/political environment. The racism is experienced to be present everywhere in society: It is experienced in ordinary contact with White people, including those who are in positions of relative authority and power (such as the police, teachers, service providers, government bureaucrats, and so on), those who without the benefit of cultural and institutional advantages would theoretically be in a position of equal power (such as peers, competitors in sport, the general public), and in the few instances in which participants are in a position of relative power, from clients, customers, or workers. This pattern implies that

Aboriginal Australians can potentially experience racism every day.

Essed (1990) suggests that such everyday racism is often covert, subtle, and seemingly intangible. She argues that experiencing everyday racism means meticulously checking and considering again and again whether prejudice and discrimination is present in a given situation. In other words, the victims of racism think about an incident carefully before labeling it racism because it is not in their interest to see more racism than is actually there. However, the participants in this study knew clearly that they had experienced racism. Their assessment was based on strong reasoning, but the overt nature of most of the racism reported suggested that there was no necessity to meticulously check and recheck. Two hundred years of colonization, dispossession, genocide, and cultural imperialism, as well as everyday racism, left little doubt in the minds of the participants that their experiences in day-to-day life are tinged by racism. The reduced life chances, such as an increased chance of being unemployed, having to leave school before completing one's education, difficulty in obtaining housing, and high rates of imprisonment are further evidence of the pervasiveness of racism. In sum, the rights, respect, and recognition, which Whites take for granted in their own lives, are, according to the data, self-evidently denied to Koories.

The argument that because there is a cultural norm against racism (e.g., Billig, 1988), contemporary racism is predominantly subtle or symbolic may thus be misleading, at least in the Australian context. Not only was it the norm for the participants in this study to have experienced racism in their daily lives but much of the racism experienced was one-on-one, blatant, old-fashioned racism. The overt nature of so much of the racism reported by Koori participants suggests that the notions of symbolic, modern, and aversive racism are only new strings to the racist's bow rather than a new bow. This suggests that the increasingly social unacceptability of racism proposed to exist in the United States (Pettigrew, 1989), Europe (Essed, 1991, 1992; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995), and the United Kingdom (Billig, 1988), for example, also may be a myth.

This further challenges the validity of studying racism only from the perspective of the perpetrator. Although such studies may have reassured politically correct individuals (including social scientists) by leading to the suggestion of diminishing racism, new cultural norms, or more subtle expression, they do not match the reality of the experiences of the participants in their efforts to enjoy a "normal" everyday life. The danger for the social sciences in continuing to focus on perpetrators is that they may inadvertently operate as tools of the politics of

the time, just as they have done in some societies in the past (see Davidson et al., 2000).

Having argued that the victims of racism should be acknowledged and listened to, it also must be recognized that there are a number of issues that may be related to the trustworthiness of these findings. In presenting and interpreting the data, it has been assumed implicitly that the picture presented by the participants is accurate. That is, the reported experiences of the participants are accepted as indicating that racism really exists to the extent described. This issue cannot be dismissed lightly. However, a consistent picture of experiences of racism was reported across the participants, and the richness of the data led to the assertion that the victims' accounts of their experience must be respected as at least providing another side of the picture that in part contributes to their view of the world and their place in it. This is a different reality to that portrayed by much of the psychological literature on racism.

However, this assertion does not deny that there are important issues related to the validity and reliability of qualitative data. One possible problem with qualitative research is that there may be difficulties associated with accessing people's experiences. Interviewees may not really know what their experience was, or it may be vague, confused, or even forgotten. On the other hand, certain events may be exaggerated for reasons of political advantage or personal grandiosity. Although the possible problem of memory is important, Essed (1992) argues that it is the reconstruction of experiences that serves the purpose of addressing the nature of racism rather than idiosyncratic detail of exactly how events happened. In this sense, the data collection method is likely to have produced data no more or less reliable than alternative qualitative methods or quantitative methods. In fact, the nature of the interviews allowed recursive questioning of any data when the meaning was unclear to the interviewee and/or the interviewer. Thus, any ambiguities were addressed as they occurred.

Furthermore, qualitative research is often criticized as being "vague, impressionistic, records disconnected or skimpy, not rigorously sampled or collected, small scale, of dubious origin, partial, and perhaps most significantly not objective and distorted by researcher's perception" (Richards, 1992, pp. 1-2). This investigation achieved rigor through systematic and detailed attention to principles of data collection and analysis. These principles were drawn from a variety of sources (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 1986; Miles & Huberman, 1994), with the aim of producing trustworthy conclusions that are unbiased and compelling (Robson, 1993) in that they are creditable, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility in this study was enhanced by the researcher having had extensive involvement in the field of inquiry as a practitioner and as a researcher. In addition, the data, findings, and interpretation were checked by a review panel of indigenous people. The purpose of this check was not only to ensure factual accuracy and interpretational logic but also to assess and enhance the credibility of the research. None of the review panel members were participants in the study.

Transferability is analogous to external validity in quantitative research. However, whereas external validity is determined by the quantitative researcher through confidence levels, transferability cannot be determined by the qualitative researcher because there are no statistical tests for significance in qualitative work. Rather, the analysis must rely on the experience and judgment of the researcher to avoid the equivalence of Type I and Type II errors (Patton, 1990). Armistead (1976) argues that drawing out similarities can only be achieved through an informed selection and interpretation that relates the meaning of accounts to the purpose of the investigation. The experience of the researcher in collecting the data, interactively reading the transcripts, and ongoing analysis led to considerable familiarity with the data. This made it possible to read the data for meaning within the context of broader research issues.

Dependability is analogous to reliability in quantitative research. Although nondirective interviews can never be repeated in exactly the same way because of the dynamic nature of conversation and its dependency on contextual issues, the consistent findings across participants suggest that the method of interview provided dependable and credible data. An independent audit of the processes was performed to ensure dependability at the analysis stage. The audit was undertaken throughout the analysis and involved double coding of data to ensure the accuracy of categorizations and having an independent researcher check the summaries of the data for bias and comprehensiveness. The findings also were checked against the original transcripts.

Confirmability is the degree to which the findings can be attributed to the subjects rather than to the biases of the researcher. It is analogous to objectivity in quantitative research. Confirmability was ensured in this study by the establishment of an audit trail that included the raw data and transcripts, notes on reducing that data to a summary format, the summary output, notes on the analysis, the analysis output, and notes on interpretation. As for dependability, the findings were checked against the original transcripts as well.

A final issue is the manner in which the data are presented. Stanfield (1993) points out that writing in the discourse style of racially oppressed populations is viewed as "unprofessional" or "popular" literature. The



disadvantage of this is that because professional or academic writing tends to be conservative, it "stifles if not outright destroys the passion that is an important element for understanding the complex depths of race, racism, ethnicity, and ethnocentrism" (p. 11). Similarly, van Dijk (1993) argues that social science discourse involves an elite way of talking and writing about the world that portrays itself as objective and value free. In reports of qualitative research, the data gathered from participants are often translated and reproduced in this language. This can in itself perpetrate stereotyped images of the oppressed. In this study, all citations from the data were reproduced unedited (other than to eliminate irrelevancies for the purpose of economy of space) and verbatim. Not only did this enable a "thick" description of the data to be provided but it is hoped that it enabled some of the passion of the informants to be captured.

## CONCLUSION

Racism is the focus of much discussion within both the political arena and the social sciences. The contemporary consensus within these arenas appears to be that the overt expression of racist attitudes, and translation of such attitudes into behaviors, is politically incorrect or against current social norms. However, the division of racism into categories such as blatant and subtle gives rise to the sense that contemporary racism is milder, more tolerable, and benign than it once was. Unfortunately, this argument seems to apply only when the perpetrators of racism are the focus of study because, from the accounts of the victims, it seems that racism still impinges on daily life in a complex manner.

## NOTES

1. The respondents are identified by code, with K04 being interviewee number 4.
2. Aboriginal deaths in custody have been the focus of great concern in Australia since the late 1980s when a series of deaths lead to a national inquiry that found that supervisory arrangements for individuals in police custody were inappropriate.
3. Melway is the publisher of a street directory for the Melbourne metropolitan region.
4. "Divi van" refers to a police patrol van with the capacity to carry detainees in the rear section.
5. "50/50" is the letters section in the *Melbourne Herald-Sun* newspaper.

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