

The Counterintuitive Association Between Life Satisfaction and Racism

SAGE Open
July-September 2013: 1–3
© The Author(s) 2013
DOI: 10.1177/2158244013505756
sgo.sagepub.com


Michaël Dambrun¹ and Donald M. Taylor²

Abstract

Research in social psychology has long established that racism emerges when people are threatened or confront negative experiences (e.g., economic deprivation). An implicit assumption is that, conversely, positive experiences will be associated with greater tolerance. Using national surveys, the present study contradicts this common sense expectation by revealing that life satisfaction is also positively related to racism. Consistent with relative gratification theory, two psychological processes may partially account for this counterintuitive effect: increased national pride and endorsement of status quo ideologies that support the advantages enjoyed by those who receive benefits from the society (i.e., political conservatism).

Keywords

social psychology, sociology, social sciences, political sociology, experimental psychology, psychology, politics and social sciences, political science, conflict research

Research in the Social Sciences has demonstrated repeatedly that negative experiences (e.g., economic deprivation, frustration, economic threat) increase racism (Brown, 1995). The implied converse is that positive experiences will lead to greater tolerance. While the impact of negative life experiences on racism has been studied for more than half a century, we know very little about the effect of the positive experiences that tend to be associated with life satisfaction (Pettigrew, 2002). Interestingly, recent research in social psychology suggests that positive life experiences may actually be related to elevated levels of racism. This counterintuitive theorizing points to the need to examine the link between racism and life satisfaction.

Interestingly for our purpose, recent research reveals that Relative Gratification, the complete opposite of Relative Deprivation, is a powerful determinant of various forms of hostile intergroup attitudes (see, for example, Dambrun, Guimond & Taylor, 2006; Harth, Kessler, & Leach, 2008; Postmes & Smith, 2009).

According to Relative Gratification Theory (Dambrun, Taylor, McDonald, Crush, & Méot, 2006), at least two psychological processes might explain the reasons why increased life satisfaction could lead to higher levels of racism. First, people who feel satisfied with their circumstances in life will naturally feel an elevated attraction to, and pride in, the nation state that supports their desirable living conditions. Importantly, high levels of national pride have been linked to increased racism (Branscombe & Wann, 1992). Second, because people of privilege tend to endorse ideologies that favor the maintenance of their advantaged lifestyle, (right-wing) political conservatism

should also mediate this effect. This is because political conservatism provides moral and intellectual support for the status quo by resisting change, and rationalizing the existent inequalities (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). In sum, we hypothesized a bilinear relationship between the life satisfaction–dissatisfaction continuum and racism, such that the negative and positive extremes of the continuum would be associated with greater racism. Moreover, we hypothesized that the effect of life satisfaction on racism would be mediated by national pride and political conservatism.

Method

Using the 1988 Euro-Barometer Survey, we tested our predictions among participants from four European countries (France, Great Britain, Netherlands, and West Germany; $n = 4,056$). Different scales assessed four separate constructs: life satisfaction–dissatisfaction, national pride, political conservatism, and racism. Two items comprised the life satisfaction measure (e.g., “All in all to what extent would you say you are satisfied with the life you lead at this time?”);

¹Clermont Université, Université Blaise Pascal, LAPSCO, CNRS, Clermont-Ferrand, France

²McGill University, Montréal, Quebec, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Michaël Dambrun, UFR de Psychologie, Clermont Université, Université Blaise Pascal, LAPSCO UMR CNRS, 34 avenue Carnot, Clermont-Ferrand, 63000, France.

Email: michael.dambrun@univ-bpclermont.fr

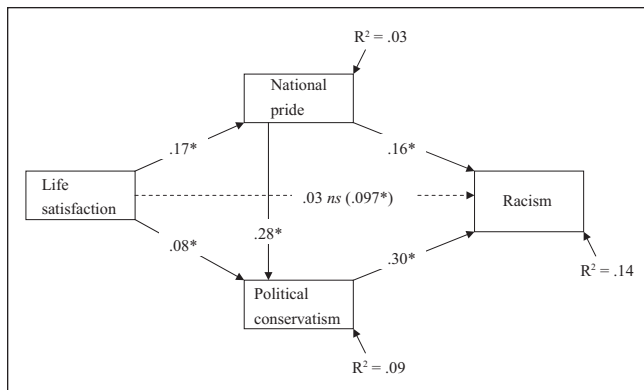


Figure 1. National pride and political conservatism as two mediators of the effect of life satisfaction on racism.
 Note. CFI = .997, NFI = .995, GFI = .999; AGFI = .993; RMSEA = .03.
 * $p < .001$.

1 = completely dissatisfied and 10 = completely satisfied; $\alpha = .89$; Items 118 and 119). National pride was assessed by a single item (i.e., “Would you say you are very proud [4], quite proud [3], not very proud [2], not at all proud [1], to be [nationality]?” Item 130). A single item assessed political conservatism (i.e., “In political matters, people talk of “the left” [1] and “the right” [10]. How would you place your views on this scale?” Item 476). Finally, racism was measured using a 21-item scale (e.g., “outgroup members” living here should not push themselves where they are not wanted”; 1 = strongly agree, 4 = strongly disagree; $\alpha = .90$; Items 331, 332, 335, 337, 338, 339, 342-351, 354-358). “Outgroups” included Turks (Sample 1, $n = 1,047$) in West Germany, Asians (Sample 2; $n = 507$) and North Africans (Sample 3; $n = 494$) in France, Surinamers (Sample 4; $n = 496$) and Turks (Sample 5; $n = 503$) in Netherlands, and Asians (sample 6; $n = 500$) and West Indians (sample 7; $n = 509$) in Great Britain. Details about the sampling procedures and the full schedule of the Euro-Barometer 30 survey are available in Reif and Melich (1991).

Results

The predicted bilinear model assumes a different slope for participants who enjoy life satisfaction (i.e., ratings equal or above the median) than for those who experience life dissatisfaction (i.e., ratings below the median). Confirming our main hypothesis, the bilinear function was significant ($F = 39.84, p < .001$). Life satisfaction ($\beta = .097, p < .001$) and life dissatisfaction ($\beta = -.121, p < .001$) were associated with greater levels of racism.

To better understand this intriguing relationship between life satisfaction and racism, we used structural equation modeling, and our predicted mediation model received strong support (see Figure 1). This model, without the dotted line between life satisfaction and racism, produced a good fit with the observed covariance. The chi-square value was not

significant ($\chi^2 = 2.704, p > .10$), and all the various indices were more than adequate (CFI = .997, NFI = .995, GFI = .999; AGFI = .993; RMSEA = .03). Sobel tests revealed that an increase in national pride ($z = 6.66, p < .01$) and political conservatism ($z = 4.96, p < .01$) significantly mediated the effect of life satisfaction on racism.

Discussion

After decades of research on the negative life experiences that are associated with racism, the present study reveals that life satisfaction is also associated with greater racism, and apparently to the same degree as life dissatisfaction. Thus, a more complete understanding of racism demands that the role of positive life experiences for perpetrators be addressed.

These results confirm the key role of relative deprivation, but in addition reveal that the relative gratification effect on intergroup attitudes, previously largely unexplored is robust and not limited to the laboratory context and to some countries such as France (Guimond & Dambrun, 2002) or South Africa (Dambrun, Taylor, McDonald, Crush & Méot, 2006).

An important aim of the present research was to explore the potential mediating role of ethnic identification and political conservatism. We hypothesized that when people are satisfied with their circumstances in life, they might feel more attracted to and pride in the national state that supports their desirable living conditions. Because stronger national identification tends to be related to an increased bias against outgroups (e.g., Dambrun, Taylor, et al., 2006; Perreault & Bourhis, 1999), national identification should act as a mediator of the effect of life satisfaction on intergroup attitudes. The results of the present research provide a clear support for this hypothesis. The model by which national identification mediates the effect of life satisfaction on racism was statistically significant. However, when people are in a state of relative gratification, they find themselves in a privileged position (Kawakami & Dion, 1995). Greater prejudice toward outgroups may emerge in an attempt to justify and maintain such privileges. As Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) argue, “People of higher status may stigmatize those of lower status to justify their advantages” (p. 509). Because political conservatism provides moral and intellectual support for the status quo by resisting change, and rationalizing the existent inequalities (Jost et al., 2003), we predicted that political conservatism also would mediate the relationship between life satisfaction and racism. Again, the results provide support for this hypothesis. The model by which political conservatism mediates the effect of life satisfaction on racism also was statistically significant. The path-analysis confirms that national identification and political conservatism were two independent mediators of this relationship. These results are the first to our knowledge supporting the hypothesis that when people feel gratified or satisfied with their life circumstances, they enter in a process of justification and maintenance of their

advantaged position. Of course, a deeper investigation of this justification process is needed.

While the results of the present research support our hypotheses, it must be acknowledged that the correlations between the variables are modest, accounting for a small percentage of variance. Because the present study is based on a correlational design, no strong claims about causal relations among variables can be made. For example, future research could examine the mediating role of national identification and political conservatism using an experimental design. On the positive side, the present research design provides an adequate ecological validity.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

References

- Branscombe, N. R., & Wann, D. L. (1992). Physiological arousal and reactions to outgroup members during competitions that implicate an important social identity. *Aggressive Behavior*, 18, 85-93.
- Brown, R. J. (1995). *Prejudice: Its social psychology*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Crocker, J., Major, B., & Steele, C. (1998). Social stigma. In D. Gilbert, S. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (4th ed., pp. 504-553). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.
- Dambrun, M., Guimond, S., & Taylor, D. M. (2006). The counter-intuitive effects of Relative Gratification on intergroup attitudes: Ecological validity, moderators and mediators. In S. Guimond (Ed.), *Social comparison and social psychology: Understanding cognition, intergroup relations and culture* (pp. 206-227). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Dambrun, M., Taylor, D. M., McDonald, D., Crush, J., & Méot, A. (2006). The Relative Deprivation-Gratification Continuum and Attitudes of South Africans towards Immigrants: A Test of the V-Curve Hypothesis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91, 1032-1044.
- Guimond, S., & Dambrun, M. (2002). When prosperity breeds intergroup hostility: The effects of relative deprivation and relative gratification on prejudice. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 900-912.
- Harth, N. S., Kessler, T., & Leach, C. W. (2008). Advantaged group's emotional reactions to intergroup inequality: The dynamics of pride, guilt, and sympathy. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34, 115-129.
- Jost, J. T., Glaser, J., Kruglanski, A. W., & Sulloway, F. J. (2003). Political conservatism as motivated social cognition. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129, 339-375.
- Kawakami, K., & Dion, K. L. (1995). Social identity and affect as determinants of collective action: Toward an integration of relative deprivation and social identity theories. *Theory & Psychology*, 5, 551-577.
- Perreault, S., & Bourhis, R. Y. (1999). Ethnocentrism, social identification and discrimination. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25, 91-103.
- Pettigrew, T. F. (2002). Development and integration summing up: Relative deprivation as a key social psychological concept. In I. Walker & H. J. Smith (Eds.), *Relative deprivation: Specification* (pp. 351-373). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Postmes, T., & Smith, L. G. (2009). Why do the privileged resort to oppression? A look at some intragroup factors. *Journal of Social Issues*, 65, 769-790.
- Reif, K., & Melich, A. (1991). *Euro-Barometer 30: Immigrants and out-groups in Western Europe*. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.

Author Biographies

Michaël Dambrun is a professor of social psychology at Université Blaise Pascal (France). His research mainly focus on two topics: (1) the study of intergroup hostility and torture and (2) the study of the interrelationship between self-based psychological functioning and happiness.

Donald M. Taylor is a professor at McGill University (Canada). Professor Taylor conducts laboratory and field research in the area of intergroup relations and group processes. Of particular interest are the conditions under which members of a disadvantaged group will accept their situation, take individual action, or instigate collective action. Current research focuses on refugees in Canada, racial groups in urban centres in Canada and the United States, South Africa and Indonesia and aboriginal groups such as the Inuit of Arctic Quebec and the Mohawks.