Responses to Racism: A Taxonomy of Coping Styles Used by Aboriginal Australians

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The author takes up the challenge from social psychologists to explore the coping responses of those who experience racism. Previous attempts to provide taxonomies of responses to racism–discrimination–oppression are reviewed. An analysis of data derived from semistructured interviews conducted with 34 Indigenous Australians that explored experiences of racism and emotional and behavioral responses is reported, and a taxonomy of coping made up of 3 broad categories is presented. The defining feature of these categories is the purpose of the responses contained therein: to defend the self, to control or contain the reaction, or to confront the racism. It is argued that this may be a more useful way to understand responses to racism than taxonomies previously proposed.

It has been argued that although research and theorizing about racism have provided insights into processes associated with racism and its perpetrators, there is a need to consider racism in the context of social interactions, and for the focus of the study of racism to shift from the perpetrator to the victims. Many researchers have suggested that this is an aspect of racism that is underresearched. In particular, Jones (1997) observed that many "social psychologists have spent most of their scientific careers focusing on the perpetrators of prejudice. Often what is missing from such discussions is an analysis of how the targets of prejudice react to and cope with it" (p. 261). Adams (1991) and Gaines and Reed (1995) have argued that as a result of such omissions, our ability to gain an understanding of racism is limited.

The argument for focusing on these issues is further elaborated by Feagin and Sikes (1994, pp. 15–19), who suggested that experiences with racism not only are painful and stressful in the immediate situation and aftermath but also have a "cumulative" (negative) impact on individuals, their families, and communities. Feagin and Sikes further argued that the repeated experience of racism significantly shapes not only individuals' way of living but also their life perspective, which comes to "embed a repertoire of responses to hostile and racist acts" (pp. 14–15). This view was elaborated by Harrell (2000), who, as well as reviewing the manifestations of

racism-related stress, discussed its impact on well-being and mental health.

Adams (1991) invoked the concept of psychosocial stress in describing the process by which racism impinges on the lives of victims. According to Lazarus (1971), *psychosocial stress* refers to the socially derived, socially conditioned, and socially situated psychological processes that stimulate subjective distress. A major attribute of psychosocial stress, as opposed to physiological stress, is that the response depends on how the person interprets or appraises (consciously or unconsciously) the significance of a harmful, threatening, or challenging event.

Pearlin and Schooler (1978) suggested that in the face of any stressor, the victim is expected to take action to avoid or lessen his or her life problems. Following Zatura, Sheets, and Sandler (1996), it can be argued that the cognitive and behavioral efforts made to restore emotional equilibrium and resolve the problems caused by psychosocial stressors such as racism constitute coping strategies. Thus, coping can be viewed as a stabilizing factor that can help individuals maintain psychosocial adaptation during stressful periods; for the individual exposed to racism, the distress experienced should lead to attempts at "stress management."

One advantage of adopting the psychosocial stress paradigm in conceptualizing responses to racism to be part of an interactive dynamic social system appears to be its more complete account of the racism–stress process. It assumes that experiencing racism involves an interpretation of the event (other's behavior) as being racist (cf. Essed, 1991, 1992) and an appraisal that it is harmful (cf. Lazarus, 1971),

causes psychological tension (cf. Adams, 1991), and demands a response from the individual (cf. Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

Coping literature (e.g., Endler & Parker, 1990; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Nowack, 1989) suggests that coping responses can be divided into two broad domains: strategies oriented toward approaching and confronting the source of the stress (*problem-focused* strategies) and those oriented toward avoiding dealing directly with the problem (*emotion-focused* strategies). Problem-focused coping involves actions designed to alter directly the aspect of the environment that is harmful, threatening, or challenging. It involves actions aimed at solution of a problem, cognitive reorganization, or minimization of the effects of the problem. Emotion-focused coping involves efforts aimed at managing internal states through defensive reappraisals, whereby the harmful or threatening significance of the event is distorted and the event is misjudged as benign or neutral. It includes emotional responses (e.g., denial), self-preoccupation (e.g., withdrawal), and fantasizing. Although individuals may use each of these styles of coping to varying degrees when confronted with stressors (Holahan & Moos, 1985), in general, a higher proportion of active or problem-focused coping in the total coping effort has been associated with better psychological outcomes than reliance on strategies such as avoidance, resignation, and withdrawal, which may ultimately increase distress and amplify future problems. This suggestion has been supported by research into disorders such as psychosomatic complaints (Holahan & Moos, 1986), posttraumatic stress disorder (Solomon, Mikulincer, & Avitzur, 1988), and depression (Krantz & Moos, 1988), for example.

There are a number of alternative conceptualizations of modes of coping behavior. For example, Billings and Moos (1981, 1984) have proposed three dimensions of coping behavior: active (or approach) coping, passive (avoidant) coping, and social support seeking. Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989) suggested four dimensions: active coping, social support seeking, denial or disengagement, and positive reinterpretation.

Although the negative impact of racism on individuals' personality and life enjoyment has long been identified (e.g., DuBois, 1903/1969; Kardiner & Ovesey, 1962), research aimed at understanding the responses of individuals exposed to racism has been limited. In fact, Kuo (1995), reporting on an empirical study that established that Asian Americans tend to use emotion-focused coping in the face of discrimination, suggested that there is a paucity of information on how minorities cope with racial discrimination. However, there are four exceptions to this: Allport (1954) suggested 15 different responses to racism, Pettigrew (1964) suggested three general classes of response, and Simpson and Yinger (1985) presented four such classes. Further, Harrell (1979) suggested a set of six possible styles of adjustment to a racist society by Black Americans.

These four taxonomies have many common elements. Table 1 offers an interpretation of these approaches according to the range of styles of coping suggested by the literature on coping cited above: active or problem-focused coping, denial–disengagement or emotion-focused coping, social support seeking, and positive reinterpretation. Although the matching of the responses from the taxonomies with the modes of coping is not "clean," it can be seen from Table 1 that the majority of the responses suggested by the four taxonomies fall into the active, or problem-focused, mode and that there are no examples of positive reinterpretation.

It can also be suggested that, in general, the responses suggested by the four taxonomies occur as adaptations to systemic ongoing oppression that is institutionalized within the society. There is little indication of how individuals respond to specific experiences of racism. This limits the usefulness of the taxonomies in understanding responses to the range of racism existing within societies.

In addition to these taxonomies, there are several emerging bodies of literature that provide some sense of the complexity of the issues involved in understanding how people respond to factors associated with racism. These are theories of biculturation (e.g., LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Lin, Masuda, & Tazuma, 1982), theories of identity formation incorporating reaction to racism (e.g., Helms, 1990, 1995), work on response to stigmatization (e.g., see Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998, for a review), assumptive world theory (Janoff-Bulman, 1985, 1989, 1991), and social psychological theories on responses to deprivation, injustice, and inequality between groups (see Lalonde & Cameron, 1994, for an overview).

However, these theories are not discussed here, as the purpose of this study was to investigate the range of responses to specific experiences of racism reported by members of one minority group, Aborigines, the Indigenous Australians. Over the last 2 centuries, this Indigenous population has been subjected to colonization, attempted genocide, forced removal of children from families, and multiple forms of discrimination, all of which have resulted in extensive

Table 1

Interpretation of the Taxonomies of Response to Prejudice and Discrimination in Terms of Modes of Coping

Mode of coping	Allport (1954)	Pettigrew (1964)	Simpson and Yinger (1985)	Harrell (1979)
Problem-focused/active	Enhanced striving and status striving	Achievement and seeking a place in the mainstream	Climb-the-ladder approach	Piece-of-the-action style
	Passing (i.e., denying racial identity if possible)	Passing	Passing	
	Clowning	Joking		
	Sympathy with other groups	Negative stereotypes about the oppressors		
	Slyness and petty revenge	Cunning revenge, aggressive meekness	Symbolic attacks, withdrawal of deference	
	Fighting back	Physical attack, militancy	Physical aggression, protest, boycotts	Authoritarianism
			Reformism	Flexible style
	Prejudice against other out-groups, aggression against the in-group		Displaced aggression	
	Hypervigilance	Vigilance	Reduced contact through isolation, separation, immigration, separate state	
		Insularity	Art and humor	
Emotion-focused	Withdrawal	Withdrawal	Acceptance and self-hatred	Apathy
	Neuroticism	Extreme escapism	Escapism	Engagement in countercultural lifestyle
Social support seeking	Strengthening in-group ties	Focusing on Negro pride		Black Nationalist style
Positive reinterpretation	None	None	None	None

disadvantage in present-day society. This history and disadvantage are documented elsewhere (e.g., Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997; Hunter, 2000; Reynolds, 2001) but are demonstrated by the following statistics provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001, 2002).

With respect to health:

1. Infant mortality rates are more than twice the rate of the national population.

2. Life expectancy of Indigenous people is between 19 and 20 years lower than for other Australians.

3. In 1988–1999, based on rates for the total Australian population, there were 10–15 times more hospitalizations for Type 2 diabetes than expected in the Indigenous population.

4. The death rate among Indigenous people is higher than that recorded for the general population for almost all causes of death and all age groups. In the 35- to 54-year-old age group, the death rate is between 5 and 6 times that expected.

5. Deaths from endocrine and metabolic diseases are between 7 and 9 times higher than expected.

With respect to employment and income:

1. The unemployment rate for Aborigines is 3 times the national average. The unemployment rate in February 2001 was 23.0% for Indigenous people, compared with 7.4% for non-Indigenous people.

2. Indigenous families earn only two thirds the amount that non-Indigenous families earn.

With respect to the judicial system:

1. Nationally, the Indigenous rate of imprisonment in June 2000 was approximately 14 times that of the non-Indigenous population. Although they make up only approximately 2% of the population, 19% of those in prison were Indigenous.

2. There is a high rate of deaths in custody. Although this high rate has been the subject of a Royal Commission, it has not declined.

With respect to housing:

1. In thirty-nine percent of Indigenous households in non-sparsely populated areas residents are home owners, compared with 70% of the non-Indigenous population.

2. Indigenous people spend a greater proportion of their income on housing than non-Indigenous people.

3. Indigenous people are more likely than the non-Indigenous population to live in conditions considered unacceptable by general Australian standards. Poorly maintained buildings and facilities, inadequate infrastructure, sewerage malfunctions, water restrictions, and interruptions to power supplies are problems frequently reported by people living in Indigenous communities.

In addition to this disadvantage, Aboriginal Australians report experiencing extensive racism. This has recently been documented by the author (Mellor, 2003), but many Indigenous individuals (e.g., Gilbert, 1988) and organizations have for many years been attempting to raise awareness of these matters among the majority population. In the author's previous study (Mellor, 2003), Indigenous participants indicated that they potentially experience racism on a daily basis in all kinds of interactions in all kinds of settings. In this study, the responses to those experiences are reported.

Method

Participants

In the Australian context, the term *Aborigine* refers to a broad range of people. The Australian federal government's working definition for Aboriginal identification includes any person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies himself or herself as an Aborigine or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives (Australian Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 1981). This study focused on just one subgroup of the Aboriginal population: the urbanized Koori population of Melbourne. According to the sparse reports available (e.g., Slattery, 1987), urban Aboriginal populations have tended to adopt a pattern of bicultural adaptation in relation to the mainstream population that is similar to the *alternation* style described by LaFromboise et al. (1993). On the one hand, they live in separate families that are well-integrated into the urban environment, but on the other, they also operate as a separate, self-defined community that prefers to use facilities that are specifically funded for Aborigines. Within this separate community there are specific, relatively autonomous subgroups defined by kinship. There is a high level of mobility within the community, and most members retain their connection with the rural or remote areas from which their family derives.

The sample for this study consisted of 34 members of the Koori population, 18 female and 16 male, between the ages of 18 and 58 years, who were recruited using a nonprobability sampling technique that involved snowball sampling. Consistent with the demographic distribution of Indigenous people, the participants were drawn from across the Melbourne metropolitan area rather than from a specific neighborhood. 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.

Procedure

As suggested elsewhere (Mellor, 2003), there is an extreme skepticism among Aboriginal Australians about the usefulness of any research involving them. Dudgeon and Oxenham (1989) drew on Nobles's (1980) concept of scientific colonialism to explain this skepticism. They argued that many Indigenous Australians feel that research conducted by non-Indigenous Australians about them is simply another means of exploitation of Aborigines and that there have been few benefits flowing back into the community from previous research. Thus, gaining the participation of the Koori community in this study required spending an extensive period of time making contacts within the community and establishing trust through clearly explaining the study, the researcher's prior work with Aboriginal communities, and the benefits that the study might provide by raising awareness of the issue of racism within the community. All participants took part in the study willingly and contributed openly.

The data were derived through in-depth interviews that used conversational techniques to elicit the interviewees' contributions. The aim of the interviews was to give the participants the opportunity to describe their experiences of racism and responses to it and to provide the opportunity for them to qualify their statements and to elaborate on their explanations. The interviews were conducted on the participants' own "territory" (i.e., at community centers and meeting places or in their homes) in order to help avoid relative power relationships influencing the interviews (Finch, 1993). The interviews were audiotaped rather than transcribed at the time in order to ensure a smooth flow of conversation. This allowed interviewees to talk informally in a more relaxed atmosphere.

The interviews were open-ended and semistructured in nature but addressed the following issues: (a) the experiences the interviewee had had that he or she considered to have been racist or to have had a racist component (when instances were offered, the interviewee was asked to elaborate as necessary in order for the interviewer to ascertain the circumstances and aspects of the incident that the interviewee experienced as racism), (b) how the interviewee felt when the incident was experienced, and (c) how the interviewee responded to the particular experiences.

The interviews ranged from approximately 60 to 110 min in length, including preparation and debriefing.

Results

The data were analyzed with NUD*IST (Version 4), a software package that facilitates the classification of qualitative data and enables links to be made between those classifications and patterns in the data to be investigated. Although data were collected on racist phenomena that typically have several aspects (including events, location, perpetrator, impact on the victim, and response of the victim), the concern here is with the range of coping responses. The range of events deemed by the participants to be racist have been presented elsewhere (Mellor, 2003).

Coping was described earlier as actions that serve the purpose of avoiding or reducing the threat posed by stressors such as racism. The Koori participants in this study described a variety of ways in which they coped with racist experiences. A series of categories emerged from the data, which were then coded according to the categories. These categories were then grouped according to common themes. These themes revolved around whether the focus of the action was to defend the self, control the self, or confront the source of the racism. The groups of strategies, which can be conceptualized as moving along a continuum from a defensive to an attacking style of response, are summarized in Table 2. A selection of responses that provide a rich summary of the data are used to elaborate on the groups of strategies.

Group 1 Strategies: Defending the Self

This group of strategies consists of six types of response, none of which challenge racism or the perpetrators of racism directly; thus, this group of strategies does not have an impact on racism. However, each of these strategies serves to protect the self in some way. The first involves acceptance of racism and is evident in three different behavioral patterns: escape–withdrawal, resignation to fate, and avoidance of further contact.

The second type of coping strategy in this group involves a reinterpretation of the situation. This cognitively based response style is designed to "take the sting out of the racist experience." It includes reinterpreting the event in a different light and reversing the situation by empathically evaluating the perpetrator to have moral deficits. Thus, the racist event is not overtly challenged, but rather the perception of the event and its meaning is changed.

The third type of defensive coping strategy is to seek social support. The final three defensive strategies identified aim to create circumstances in which

Table 2
Approaches to Coping With Racism

Focus of energy		
Protecting the self	Self-control	Confronting the racism
(1) Displaying acceptance Withdrawal/escape Resignation to fate Avoidance of further contact (2) Engaging in cognitive reinterpretation of events (3) Using social support (4) Denying identity (5) Attempting to achieve (6) Attempting to make children strong	(1) Ignoring (2) Contained responses (3) Imagined responses	(1) Teaching–educating the perpetrator (2) Contesting the racism (3) Asserting one's rights (4) Asserting Koori identity (5) Taking control (6) Using external supports– authorities to address racism (7) Seeking revenge

the self is more secure in the future. These strategies include "passing" behavior, whereby one conceals one's identity and passes oneself off as a member of the dominant group; achieving behavior; and behavior aimed at making children stronger, which symbolically defends the self.

Group 1, Category 1: Acceptance of Racism

Withdrawal and escape. This style of response incorporates those strategies that essentially allow the individual who experiences racism to cope with that racism by psychological avoidance. K24[1] described her strategy as withdrawing into her own world:

> Oh, I just used to sit in my room and think all these kids are teasing me all the time, and my self-esteem wasn't built up enough to be proud of myself at that time. . . . I didn't wanna stand up for myself and take the kids on. Used to just go home and sit in me room, and just sit in one spot and start rocking. Yes, just staring into thin air.

Others were reported as turning to alcohol or drugs: "I think I'm affected in the way of pushing us back into drink. That's what it does. Aborigines will go and drink more, more drugs, more marijuana. That's what that impact is doing, I think" (K23).

Resignation to fate. This category was created for instances in which the individual did not consider there to be any way to address his or her racist experiences and accepted that such experiences would continue. Such responses involve apathy or passivity on the part of the individual. In essence, one gets used

to racism, as K24 suggested: "Now I know it happens all the time and I'm used to it. I accept it. It's just wherever I go, I'm gonna get the same thing."

There seem to be three reasons why racism is accepted. The first is that there is a lack of possible action to redress or successfully confront racism; the second is that any action would be fruitless and therefore not worth the effort; and the third is that to attempt to address racism is likely to result in further trouble, particularly from authority figures.

Avoidance of further contact. Some interviewees indicated that in response to racism they implement strategies over the longer term to reduce their exposure to it. One such strategy is to avoid situations in which racism occurs. Physical avoidance of racist situations is a more selective and adaptive means than the psychological withdrawal referred to above. Such avoidance is used in a number of contexts, ranging from interpersonal domains to institutional domains. Sometimes this involves changing one's behavior, which, although it may be adaptive, may also have costs.

In the interpersonal domain, interviewees chose to stay clear of, or move away from, those whom they considered to be racist. For example: "But if they persist in that area [racist jokes], well I just move away from that person" (K30).

Others reported avoiding racism through conscious planning on the basis of past experiences or prior knowledge: "I know a lot of my friends, some of their parents are very racist, and I just won't go anywhere

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[1]Participants are identified by a code. K24 is the 24th (Koori) participant.

near their houses. I won't have any, regardless, not just against Aboriginal, against Black people" (K09).

Another variation of avoidance involves a protective change of location for particular behaviors as a result of perceived racism:

> It's changed a hell of a lot. A lot of us have gone indoors now, and um, that's what the discrimination people are doing because if we're on the streets, we're the first people that's going to be picked up. And that's bad for us, you know? (K08)

In some cases, engagement in sports and educational and social activities is stopped, even though such coping strategies may be restrictive or have negative implications for the individual. For example, K18 decided to give up playing football because of racism on the field, and K29 reported on a girl's leaving school because of the tormenting to which she was subjected after declaring her Aboriginality.

Others have chosen to avoid the police, government services, nightclubs, and shops because of perceived racism. For example, K23 said that he never went back to the motor registration office because he was humiliated by the clerk's ignoring him for 45 min because "he was standing in the dark," and he never went back to nightclubs after being refused admittance in his earlier years.

Group 1, Category 2: Reinterpretation of Events

This category was used to incorporate those instances in which individuals reinterpret a situation that they had initially interpreted as being racist. This enables them to change the balance of psychological power, by, for example, finding advantage rather than disadvantage in a situation, or reaffirming their sense of self to maintain equality or even superiority over the perpetrators. For example, K01 found that no one sat next to her on the train and reported this as being an example of racism. However, she went on: "I felt really good in a sense. It felt like there was more room for me to sit."

Further, it appears that the way one sees oneself and one's situation can be an important defense or weakness in racist encounters. Internal reaffirmations of the self are demonstrated in the following extract:

> But I just tell myself, "Oh who cares. I don't care what they think. I am what I am, I can't help it. . . ." I just say, "If you can't accept it, I don't want to know yous mate. It's not my problem. If you can't accept me, I can't accept you." (K06)

In addition to reinterpreting events in this way, and reaffirming the self, weakness of character may be attributed to the perpetrators of racism. Not only does this reinforce the concept of self by asserting that the stereotypes underlying the racism are not true (e.g., being Black is not indicative of inferiority, being dirty, etc.) but it psychologically reverses the situation through the projection of inferior traits onto the perpetrator. For example, many interviewees attributed racist occurrences to the perpetrators' ignorance, stupidity, or bad parenting, and as a result, they felt sympathy for the perpetrators. One example is K29's response to a racist comment by a shopper: "Oh, I just sort of brushed it off. 'Cos I just kept on lookin' at the clothes, and, and I thought to myself, 'Oh yeah, poor woman.'"

K33 also identified the perpetrators of racism as having the problem and, therefore, deserving pity. In essence, the perpetrators were seen to be victims of their upbringing:

> If people call me names, well like I said to you, it's them's the ones who are the ones you've gotta feel sorry for. Because they've gotta be pitied. . . . I feel sad for the people who are doing it because they are the ones who really have nothing to offer.

Group 1, Category 3: The Use of Social Support

An external source of support is the Koori community itself. Making use of this resource seems to protect the self in two ways. First, there is a withdrawal from the broader community, because it is more comfortable within the Koori community. Interviewees reported that the community "sticks together like one big family" (K01) as a means of managing.

The second aspect of social support is, in essence, the sharing of the experiences of racism. Not only the support but also the trauma of racism is shared:

> I tell me cousins when I see 'em. Me first cousins. We're pretty close, like brothers. [Interviewer: So you talk about it a little bit?] Yeah—just like any, all different issues. At the time to get it off the chest, you know. (K20)

Making light of shared racist experiences is also a means of coping. It affirms that the individual has been victimized and that the experience should not be taken seriously or personally:

> And I mean our people can also make a big joke about this [being pulled over by the police frequently]. It's their way of coping with a hurtful, bad situation. Well,

just say "Hey," you know, just say "Hey, did you hear about what happened to so and so? Got pulled over because he was in his car." So everybody laughs and say, "Oh God, here we go again," you know. And so they make light of it to be able to cope with it. (K28)

Group 1, Category 4: Denial of Identity

One method of protecting the self from the stress of racism is to attempt to detach oneself from the Koori community to achieve security or equal treatment. For example, K09 stated:

> It did get me to a point where I was going to turn my back completely on my Aboriginality and on other things because I thought if this is how I am going to be treated, then it is not worth it.

This coping strategy is particularly applicable, and only available, to those who are less dark skinned. It is equivalent to Allport's (1954), Pettigrew's (1964), and Simpson and Yinger's (1985) notion of passing. For some individuals, denial of identity was an adaptive strategy to protect the family from the state.

K15 had used this denial of identity strategy in the past to protect himself from the learned "shame" associated with being Koori:

> We classed ourselves as White people, I suppose, them days because you could call it shame, ashamed or too cautious. . . . You wanted to jump out, you still had plenty of vigour and all that, but you just couldn't tell people that you was Koori.

In the present day, in situations in which there is no face-to-face contact, denying Aboriginality, or not mentioning it, can also be used to obtain fair treatment as K23 pointed out:

> Like once we wanted to get a 'fridge, and our lady who rang up the [possible donors] kept saying, "this Maralinga Aboriginal organization wants to know if you got any 'fridges around." She kept on, she tried about 15, 20 places, and I told her, "You drop the Aboriginal part." And she done that, she got a 'fridge, just like that. 'Cos we went and picked it up from them, and they couldn't do nothing about it. We turned up . . . I s'pose out of 21 you'd, once you'd dropped the Aboriginal part, you get it straight away.

A particular form of seeking to pass out of the Koori community is to fantasize or attempt to change one's color. This may be particular to children. For example:

> I remember going home from school for about 6 months and having a cry every night of the week and scrubbing my skin to try until it was red raw. . . . It never came off, the color of my skin never came off. Yeah, I put powder on my face before I went to school. Michael Jackson jokes! (K12)

Group 1, Category 5: Attempts to Achieve or Excel

Some interviewees in this study reported that they set out to achieve in order to demonstrate their worthiness and thus to prove the perpetrators of racism to be wrong. K09 spoke of her determination in this regard:

> And I grew up in, I didn't grow up in a flash house. I had many of my friends, their mothers turned to them, and I heard their mothers say, "what are you hanging around with her for? She comes from, you know, that neighbourhood." You know? And it's like "Hey! But she can't help it." But now, as I got older, it made me more determined to get out there. I didn't know what I was going to be, but it made me more determined to be someone, or to make a difference somewhere.

Group 1, Category 6: Attempts to Make Children Strong

Several interviewees suggested that they had decided to make their children stronger than they themselves had been in the face of racism. This strategy is encapsulated by K02, who stated:

> Well, I deal with it by making my children a lot stronger, because I don't want them being like I am. They are both independent now, but I put a lot in too, to make sure that they never get caught up in the trap that my mother did, and that I end up growing up being an angry person.

Group 2: Controlled Responses

Like the previous group of strategies for dealing with racism, this group of coping responses involves a recognition that racism has occurred but a lack of direct and overt response to it. However, in contrast to the coping responses outlined above, individuals who use this type of coping do not believe that the situation is hopeless. Neither do they show acceptance or apathy in the face of racism. Instead, they make a conscious choice to ignore the event, contain their response, or respond in an imaginary way.

Group 2, Category 1: Ignoring

When individuals ignore a racist occurrence, they are attempting to minimize the event's impact. This

type of response is indicated by phrases such as "not taking notice of the event," "blocking it [the racist comment] out," "not letting it [racism] worry you," and so on. It seems to signify a deliberate strategy that is adopted to avoid the expenditure of emotional energy or the consequences of other actions. The data provide numerous examples of this strategy, two of which follow:

> The thing about me, when I get called a "coon," "Abo," or "Aboriginal bum cleaner," . . . I block it out. (K05)

> Honestly, because I've experienced it all my life now, it's just like water off a duck's back. I don't care what you say to me, I'll still go and get on with my life and do what I set out to do, and you are not going to make an influence on my life. Ignore it. That's the best one. Ignore 'em. (K21)

Group 2, Category 2: Making Contained Responses

Many interviewees reported that when they encountered racist events, they had a strong desire and urge to respond in a specific manner. For example: "Mm, I mean you feel just like getting going and getting a gun and doing 'em over, you know, and a lot of 'em do feel that way" (K08).

This style of coping refers to the desire to respond to a racist experience but a decision not to. It is a more energetic response than ignoring, because it requires suppression of the impulse to respond rather than merely a decision to cast aside the experience. That is, it signifies a psychic struggle between choosing a more active response and choosing to ignore an event. The decision not to respond is often based on possible consequences and moral grounds. For example:

> My husband wanted to go up and slap her [the principal's] face or something—wanted to bash that principal, you know. But we come to the crunch, we had our talk, and I said, "No that's not gonna get our kids education. It's gonna make our kids worse. We gonna have to pull our kids out of that school." You know? (K25)

Group 2, Category 3: Making Imagined Responses

Sometimes interviewees formulated arguments that they felt should be put to perpetrators of racism. These arguments were not put, but the formulation of such arguments is self-assuring. For example: Yeah, we should be saying it to them "yous should be going back to your own country. Yous the ones that come here in the first place, on the boat" (K24).

Group 3: Strategies That Confront the Racism

This group of responses to racism involves attempts to modify the environment or perpetrator. It includes verbal and behavioral responses such as contesting a point, educating a perpetrator, asserting one's rights, asserting one's identity, taking control of a situation, or seeking revenge. Such responses imply more than an acceptance of the self as worthy of defending because they confront the problem more actively than do the strategies previously discussed, and they avoid the need to modify oneself or one's behavior.

Group 3, Category 1: Teaching or Educating the Perpetrator

In some instances, the interviewees reported deliberate attempts to educate perpetrators of racism by giving them "the truth." This is mainly in order to dispel stereotypes and misinformation. For example, K09 reported as follows:

> I don't get upset if people have racist attitudes, I just try to sit them down and say, "Why? Why? I want to know how you came to that assumption in your mind. I really want to know. And let me educate you on how it is."

Another level of this approach is to educate people about how to treat Aborigines in a more acceptable manner. K03 reported on his response to a church leader who wanted to help but was seen as patronizing:

> I said, "You don't have to do anything to help me." And I said, "You don't have to do anything to help my people." I said, "Just be there. As soon as you say you want to help me, that puts me down." I said, "Always remember that."

Group 3, Category 2: Contesting the Racism

Another positive-action approach is to confront racism through actions or argument. This makes the point that the racism is not acceptable to the individual concerned. For example, K08 described her response to the violation of the norm of "first there, first served" in Australian shops:

> "This other fella come in behind me, and I was standing at the counter, and he served the other one first. I said, 'I ain't gonna say nothing.' I just put everything on the counter and walked out."

At the verbal level, some participants attempted to convince others that they were wrong or acting inappropriately through using logic, putting forward alternate information or points of view, elaborating on their personal situation (i.e., "why some stereotype doesn't apply to me"), demonstrating that generalizations do not hold up, offering positive examples to counteract negative instances provided by the perpetrator, pointing out unequal treatment, pointing out hypocritical behaviors and arguments, pointing out inconsistent or inappropriate application of rules, confronting the racism directly, and confronting racist behavior with an assertive message.

Group 3, Category 3: Asserting One's Rights

In some instances in which individuals believe they have been treated differently on the grounds of their race, they respond by asserting their rights to equal and fair treatment. This is aimed at changing the other's behavior toward them. For example, K03 described his approach in the bar:

> I do something that at least psychologically helps me cope. Like when I ask for a beer, I get a beer. [Others have] just accepted being put away in a box, and they've put a lid on the box. Like I'm put in that box too, but I refuse to stay in the box.

Group 3, Category 4: Asserting Koori Identity

Another approach reported by interviewees involved asserting their identity and demonstrating pride in it, in order that others would accept it. This occurred when people had their Aboriginality questioned in some way. For example:

> 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." I thought, I just grabbed the form, it might have been the dole office or something. I said, "Hey. This is wrong, this bloody thing. Someone has crossed that out, where I'd ticked it." (K13)

Others take pride in their Aboriginality. For example, K33 referred to the Aboriginal people being the Indigenous people in Australia:

> I got off the plane and I was walking across to go the car park, and 10 fellas come along and they was singin' out "Go back to your own country where you come from." I said, "I am from here. Do you fellas want to go home?" [Laughter].

Group 3, Category 5: Taking Control

Some interviewees responded to racism with measures that were designed to take control of a situation. These were both behavioral and verbal. For example, one strategy in the face of racism is to use humor to defuse the racism. This can consist of mimicking the racism in front of the perpetrator, or in the face of racist jokes, responding with other such jokes to take the initiative away from the perpetrator:

> You come up against people who have had a few drinks, and before they know it, they are telling a few jokes, and you always get the Black jokes in there as well. . . . I'll just throw out a few of me own, to recover their ground before they get that far, and have a good chuckle myself. (K30)

K20 reported that he controls interactions with the police to limit further involvement and harassment:

> But I always say it's best to give your name, just say it straight out, and just tell 'em your whole name, your date of birth, your address. Before he can even ask for it. Before they even say—"Oh what's your name, what's your date of birth? What's your address?" Just say the whole lot out and they have to leave you alone.

Group 3, Category 6: Using External Supports or Authorities to Address Racism

Some interviewees sought external support when they were confronted with racism. Such support may come from people, institutions, or agencies with some authority to redress racism or sometimes simply consists of social support from other members of the community. A variety of perceived authority figures or agencies were called upon when the interviewees experienced racism. For example, several interviewees reported that they had asked their parents to confront the perceived racism on their behalf: "I used to go home and tell mum. I'd say, 'Mum, I can't handle this, getting the cane all the time.' And mum used to come up to the school, and say, 'What are you doing to those kids?'" (K34).

Also approached on occasions were Aboriginal organizations such as welfare services and the Aboriginal Legal Service. K29 described how she responded to police harassment and threats:

> I rang up, ah, the after hours legal service and got on to them. And they got on to someone, in St. Kilda headquarters, I think it was. And then a couple of days later the sergeant from the Preston Police station, he came over and gave us an apology.

Others reported asking to see the manager if denied service or treated badly on the basis of race, and in some situations the police were approached to intervene. If the police are seen to be racist, their own superiors may be called upon. For example, K16 reported that when police physically harass young people, his response is as follows: "I turn around and say, 'Alright then, you can wrestle. I'll just ring up McAverney.' And like that (snap of finger), it's stopped. Because McAverney is in charge, you know."

Discrimination boards were also sometimes approached, although many interviewees did not believe they addressed racist occurrences satisfactorily. For example, one interviewee reported on the actions that followed a television report about people drinking alcohol in a park in which only Aboriginal people were interviewed despite there being White people present also:

> Um, a couple of Australian Koori people, they took it to the Discrimination Board, due to the fact that Channel 10 had a, um interviewed a couple of them, and there were White Anglo Saxons in the background. They didn't do anything about it. (K12)

Group 3, Category 7: Seeking Revenge

These coping strategies focus on the source of racism but without the explicit purpose of changing that racism or its source. This approach basically seeks to exact revenge on the perpetrators of racism by responding to the hurt and anger inflicted by the racist act.

This usually takes the form of physical acts, such as hitting out. However, it can also take a more controlled form whereby anger is expressed verbally to hurt or embarrass the perpetrator. The data provide numerous examples of this type of response in many contexts. For example: "He [my son] was going into that shop that ignored me, and I said, 'Don't go in there, 'cos they're racist.' And he stood at the door and said, 'What, racists?' You know, he really yelled it out" (K08). And: "See, I don't like to be racist back, and that 'cos I don't like being called racist either, I just prefer to hit 'em" (K18).

Most behavioral responses of this type appear to be spontaneous and individual in nature. However, instances of group revenge were provided. For example, K30 reported as follows: "About 3 months ago, . . . one of my cousins actually got bashed up by a policeman, and the local community got together and pretty much gave them the same response back, and put them in the hospital."

The level of emotion underlying this type of response is typified by K18: "The way you feel inside it's worth hitting somebody. On the outside you don't realize what's happening" (K18).

Several interviewees reported that this type of response was more likely when inhibitions have been reduced through the use of alcohol. For example, K11 explained how her response to others who went out of their way to avoid her group when she visited the zoo would have been aggression rather than ignoring had she been drinking, while K03 also described how alcohol provides "Dutch courage" to young people:

> I mean, our young people, they don't say nothing. Then they get drunk, and they are off. They're hallejullah-ing around, "What are you staring at, you White man," and "You wanna fight?" but when they are sober, they go back down again.

K16 also referred to the likelihood of such a response when there is a buildup of racism:

> Can you imagine just havin' things build up? Over 12 months is bad enough, but when you're talking about 5, 6, or 7 years, you get it built over that long, all of a sudden you are not allowed to be in a hotel and that, drinkin', you are drinkin'. It just snaps. It comes out and you go right off. No, I been where they've called out about three carloads of police. "You want me? I've had it. I'm not takin' any more of this." You just, you lose it.

Such a buildup also occurs, and is released, without the use of alcohol: "What happened, I got sick and tired of White kids calling me names, 'boong,' 'Abo,' and all the rest of it. So I learned to fight. So I bashed this girl up at school, and I got expelled" (K04).

Physical responses may not be the initial response but can occur when no effective options are perceived or when others have failed: "The thing about me, when I get called a 'coon,' 'Abo,' or 'Aboriginal bum cleaner,' I don't really, I block it out. And when they keep going, that's when I get mad, and hit 'em" (K05).

Discussion

Following Feagin and Sikes's (1994) suggestions regarding Black Americans, it can be argued that the experience of racism causes Aboriginal Australians to anticipate racism in their contact with White Australians, regardless of whether they are actually discriminated against in each instance. To live with the threat of racism means to plan how to avoid or defend oneself against it. In line with Pearlin and Schooler's (1978) conceptualization of coping, the

racism experienced and the emotions aroused demand a response.

Previous research and theorizing suggests that there is an array of styles of coping with racism, perhaps, as Allport (1954) suggested, depending on personality type. Although individuals in this study did suggest that they had adopted a particular style of responding to events that they had interpreted as racist (e.g., "I just give 'em a smile and move on" [K01] or "Ninety-nine percent of the time I'll go off my head" [K19]), there is obvious variability in the way each individual responds. That is, the coping response appears to be more situation-specific than determined by personality traits, and consistent with previous coping research findings (e.g., Holahan & Moos, 1985), any individual may use various combinations of coping strategies.

The data suggest that responses to racism can be conceptualized along a continuum that ranges from strategies that serve the purpose of defending the self to those that confront the racism. Between these two is a group of self-controlling responses that, for various reasons, are contained.

The first type of defensive response comes down to "taking" or "putting up with" incidents without protest—that is, an apathetic, passive, and defeatist resignation to fate. For some, it appears to be the easiest way to deal with racism because there does not seem to be anything that can be done about it, and if there were, it would not be worth the effort because measures to deal with racism, whether formal or informal, are ineffective or will result in further trouble. Such resignation means that the actual threat of racism is not going to be reduced. However, it is important to recognize that this type of response is a means of coping.

A more active means of protecting the self from racism is to avoid it. Although individuals change their behavior so that they will not experience racism, this also does not challenge the perpetration of racism. This strategy can simply involve moving away from a person or situation as racism is experienced. Further experiences of racism lead individuals to actively avoid future encounters by avoiding particular individuals, venues, or situations. In a sense this is akin to learning through negative reinforcement. However, at another level it is akin to political action—for example, when racist shops or services are boycotted. It should be noted that this strategy, although adaptive, may also entail a degree of maladaptive behavior because it may lead to loss of enjoyment of life and freedom or a reduced quality of life when particular activities, venues,

and situations are avoided. However, the considerable benefits of these strategies are demonstrated by the fact that they are used extensively by the participants.

A further defensive strategy operates at the cognitive level. This involves a process of reinterpreting the event so that although racism is experienced, it is interpreted in such a way that its power is limited. That is to say, there is a distortion of the experience through secondary appraisal *à la* Lazarus and Folkman (1984). This strategy may involve a response to stigma similar to that described by Crocker and Major (1989, 1994)—that is, ascribing prejudice to the perpetrator and affirming the value of the self. A stronger variation of this strategy involves a second step in which some other weakness is ascribed to the perpetrator. By projecting an inferior trait onto the perpetrator, the psychological power sought by the perpetrator in committing a racist act is reversed. For the participants in this study, inferior traits were ignorance, stupidity, and bad parenting. The participants who used this strategy tended to feel sorry or have pity for the perpetrators. Of interest, the participants refrained from valuing others negatively, even though they themselves were often valued negatively.

Also among those strategies that defend against the impact of racism is the use of social support. Social support offers a level of comfort that is not available within the broader community, and it allows individuals to share the experiences they have encountered and to affirm the racist nature of them. That is to say, it "gets things off the chest" and also allows the victims to make light of their experiences. The racism experienced by Aborigines is so pervasive across all domains of life in which they interact with the broader community (Mellor, 2003) that it is to be expected that they seek support within their own community.

The final subset of defensive strategies involves measures to place oneself (or one's children) in a stronger position with regard to the ability to deal with racism. Methods used to do this are seeking to get out of the community that is subjected to racism (passing), achieving in order to avoid racism, and taking measures to make children (successors) more able to deal with racism. Although mixed heritage is not uncommon within the urban Indigenous community in Australia, and many participants are not dark skinned, there was limited evidence of the passing behaviors proposed by Allport (1954). However, this logically follows from the fact that those who participated in the study were self-identified

Aborigines. In any case, these data suggest that despite racism, the interviewees feel more comfortable maintaining their Aboriginal identity within their own community.

The second major group of responses to racism involved strategies that were aimed at maintaining self-control. Such responses entail a recognition of racism as real and stressful and a desire to respond in an active manner. However, for a variety of reasons a choice is made not to do this. At the basic level, ignoring the event involves a conscious decision not to expend psychological energy by processing events further. That is, the individual makes a choice not to become aroused, not to respond. Not only does this save energy, it avoids the possible consequences of responding. The difference between this and the apathetic acceptance described above is that this style involves a more conscious situational decision to "turn off."

A higher level of control is evident in the second self-controlling strategy, that of containing responses, in which there is a stronger tension between the propensity to respond and the decision not to. This is especially apparent in responses to situations in which the emotional response is one of anger. This type of response perhaps indicates a high level of frustration and anger among the participants that is associated with their ongoing experience of racism. Related to this style is the mental execution of the contained response.

The third major group of coping strategies encompasses those that are aimed at changing the source of the racism through confrontation of some kind. This can include educating the perpetrators through presenting information in a factual way, contesting a point with the perpetrator, insisting that one's rights be respected, asserting identity, taking control of a situation, or calling on external supports. This is the type of coping response that Kuo (1995) argued is atypical for Asians, whose traditional values promote accommodation. However, in these data such strategies were well represented among the Koori participants. Evidence dispelling stereotypes or contrary to popular beliefs was offered to those who demonstrated ignorance, and if people were "unintentionally" racist, this was sometimes pointed out. For the participants in this study, such educative endeavors were typically reactive rather than proactive. Thus, at a more confrontational level individuals expressed a readiness to enter into arguments about beliefs, behaviors, and the manner in which they were discriminated against. This confrontation occurred in response to perceived racism from other members of the public, colleagues,

authorities, and even the police. In a similar manner, interviewees reported asserting their rights to be treated equally and fairly, according to situational norms. Likewise, interviewees demonstrated pride in their Aboriginal identity in order to convince others that they were worthy of better treatment.

Few participants gave examples of personally taking control of situations as a means of tackling or preventing racism. However, external controls and supports were used from time to time to confront racism. This strategy involved actions such as calling on authority figures, including supervisors, the police, or others who were perceived to have some kind of power or relevant knowledge. The interviewees were reluctant to use regulatory bodies governing discrimination and equal opportunity because their experience of such bodies was that they were ineffective.

The last response, which focuses on the perpetrator of racism, is revenge seeking. This strategy basically entails payback activity, with participants commonly reporting responses to racism that involved physical and verbal attacks. Although this type of response may be tension releasing, it is not specifically aimed at constructively changing the environment. This style of response implies a level of aggression and a desire to hurt the perpetrator, even though the Koori perception of the way things happen in the world would predict that such actions are likely to escalate the conflict and lead to cyclical processes that produce negative outcomes for those who engage in such behavior. Such a propensity to retaliate among the participants may have been due to the type of racism they had experienced (particularly physical violence), the sites of the racism they had experienced, the long history of racism and oppression their community has endured, and a tendency to gain Dutch courage through the use of alcohol when the individual's capacity to use other adaptive means of responding to racism was reduced.

In summary, the data suggest that coping responses can be defensive, controlled, or (counter) attacking. In a dynamic model of everyday racist experiences, this is a more useful conceptualization than the taxonomies proposed by previous researchers such as Allport (1954), Pettigrew (1964), Simpson and Yinger (1985), and Harrell (1979), which describe facets of broadly adaptive response styles to systemic discrimination. In fact, the proposed conceptualization includes the behaviors predicted by the taxonomies and theoretical offerings discussed earlier (biculturation, racial identity, response to stigma, assumptive world theory, and social psychology theories), none of

which embrace all of the coping responses observed. Finally, the proposed conceptualization of responses to racism is closer to the general stress literature, but because it classifies behavior in terms of the purpose and focus of energy, it is more positive in that it construes each style of coping as adaptive behavior. It includes the active/problem-focused and emotional dimensions of Folkman and Lazarus (1980), as well as the additional dimensions of social support seeking and positive reinterpretation proposed by Billings and Moos (1984) and Carver et al. (1989). Thus, the conceptualization of responses to racism according to the dimensions identified in these data contributes to a more cohesive and inclusive theory of coping with racism.

Having arrived at this conclusion, several new questions arise. One of these relates to the impact of various coping styles both on the perpetrators and on the individuals who experience racism. That is, do particular styles of responding reduce further racism or exacerbate it? Are particular styles of coping associated with better mental health outcomes, and could those who experience racism be trained to use more adaptive responses in order to improve their mental health? Indeed, as discussed in the introduction, problem-focused coping is generally associated with better psychological outcomes. This suggests that at least some of the counterattacking types of responses may be more beneficial than other styles of responding. Another question that arises relates to the generalizability of this taxonomy of coping to other populations or other settings. The sample size in this study was not large, but data collection ceased when further sampling was considered to be unlikely to provide new insights. In a preliminary analysis in a study of the Vietnamese in Australia, Mellor (in press) found the taxonomy to adequately encompass the coping responses used by the participants when they encountered racism. In addition to exploring these kinds of issues, further research might look at gender differences in coping responses.

A final point that is worthy of consideration is that the data for this study were collected by a White, non-Indigenous Australian. As pointed out in the Method section, Indigenous Australians generally feel that they have been overresearched by a variety of non-Indigenous professional groups, including anthropologists, sociologists, medical researchers, psychologists, and other mental health practitioners, with little benefit flowing back to their communities. Thus, they are often wary of new research. In this study, considerable attention was paid to this issue.

Methods to reduce the impact of the relative power imbalance were implemented, and the purpose of the study was clearly explained to potential interviewees, who then participated in an informed and voluntary manner. Steps taken to avoid the perpetration of further "academic colonialism" (Nobles, 1980; van Dijk, 1993) include presenting the data here using the participants' own words and checking the interpretation of the data with members of the participant group and their community to ensure that no misrepresentation had been perpetrated. A fuller discussion of these matters is provided by Mellor (2003).

In conclusion, this study provides a taxonomy of coping strategies that may be used by individuals who experience racism. The study raises a series of questions that might provide the basis for further research examining the usefulness of this taxonomy.

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