The Counterintuitive Association Between Life Satisfaction and Racism

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

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?”; 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.

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
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 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.

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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.