

BUBALAMAI BAWA GUMADA (HEALING THE WOUNDS OF THE HEART): THE SEARCH FOR RESILIENCE AGAINST RACISM FOR ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS

Abstract

Within the Australian research setting, a strong research base has emerged to articulate both the nature and impact of racism from the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It may be argued though that quantitative approaches to this research have been limited by simplistic measures that fail to capture the complexity of racism today. This limitation may have important implications for the identification of factors that could provide a buffer against the detrimental effects of racism, and thus promote a stronger and positive sense of resilience and engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. It is the purpose of this paper to summarise two studies that have sought to understand the impact of racism on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes (e.g. achievement, engagement, aspirations) and to identify factors that may limit or negate the effects of racism. Using a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, the results identified a) a measure of racism that held strong psychometric properties for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; b) that each dimension of racism revealed a range of significant and negative associations with educational outcomes; and c) multiple strategies to help combat racism and its negative effects.

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He is also a member of the ARC special initiative, National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network (NIRAKN). He completed his PhD in 2008 (examining the impact of self-concept, motivation and racism on Indigenous and non-Indigenous schooling outcomes), and has been a Chief Investigator on four ARC grants, one Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) grant, two internal university grants and two research tenures. Each of these projects has, using varying methodologies, investigated Indigenous Australian issues in education, wellbeing, self-concept, motivation, identity, peer-mentoring, bullying and racism. His projects have led to the development of a strong foundation in numerous research designs, including developing psychometrically sound instrumentation, conducting interviews across a wide range of age groups, and undertaking advanced quantitative data analyses (primarily within the Structural Equation Modelling framework). His research has also attracted a number of national and international awards (including the Australian Association for Research in Education [AARE] Betty Watts Indigenous Researcher award), and he currently has numerous journal publications, book chapters and peer-reviewed conference publications, all of which have a strong emphasis on Indigenous Australian affairs.

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Within the Australian research setting, numerous authors (e.g. Mellor, 2003) have suggested that early research on racism was too limited in its exploration of the attitudes of those who may hold some form of prejudice against people not from their own ethnic/cultural background. While the findings of such research have done much to contribute to the pursuit of a stronger and more respectful multicultural ethos within Australia, it has been argued that such research may not represent the voices of those whose everyday lived experiences may be influenced with racism (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2013). One of the first studies to attempt to identify how racism may be perceived by those forced to endure this stressor can be found in the work of Mellor (2003) who captured the voices of Aboriginal Australian adults, and found that it was 'the norm for participants in this study to have experienced racism in their daily lives' (p. 483). More recently, Dunn, Forrest, Pe-Pua, Hynes and Maeder-Han (2009) found that in a New South Wales survey of over 4000 participants, only 12 per cent of the sample reported being prejudiced towards other ethnic/cultural groups. In contrast though, over 63 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants and 45 per cent of Muslim Australian participants reported experiencing racism. This highlighted the wide discrepancy between those who report racism and those who report prejudicial attitudes.

Since Mellor's (2003) research, an array of findings has emerged, revealing that racism is frequently experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and may result in lower mental health, physical health, educational engagement, performance and educational aspirations, and an increased risk of undertaking health risk behaviours (Bodkin-Andrews, Denson & Bansel, 2013; Priest, Paradies, Gunthorpe, Cairney & Sayers, 2011). In consideration of the longstanding and negative impacts of racism on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, it is critical not only to prevent racism from occurring in the first place, but also to identify agents of resilience to help strengthen people against the negative impact of racism. Research though has suggested that the impact of discrimination may vary widely for individuals from various minority or disadvantaged backgrounds (Bodkin-Andrews, O'Rourke, Grant, Denson & Craven, 2010; Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes & Garcia, in press). For example, in an international meta-analysis conducted by Schmitt et al. (in press), it was found the impact of discrimination varied across groups, and little consistency was found across moderators of discrimination (e.g. social

support, identity, coping strategies). That is, the same moderation factor either buffered, exacerbated, or produced null effects on racism across different groups. Considering these findings, this paper will attempt to outline results from two studies that have attempted to identify agents of resilience against racism.

Study 1: *Wingara Manamai*¹ – positive psychology, resilience and racism

A number of educational and psychological researchers have emphasised the need to focus on positive constructs that may act as a potential agency for strength and resilience within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australian students (Craven & Marsh, 2008). While it may be argued that there is a plethora of research findings identifying the positive relations between a range of positive psychology constructs and various mental, physical, and educational outcomes (Marsh & Martin, 2011), there is some concern about positive psychology's potentially limited cross-cultural applicability for First Nations perspectives (Bodkin-Andrews, Denson, Finger & Craven, 2013; Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). As a result, this study examined survey responses drawn from 563 high school students from Years 7 to 11 (295 male, 260 female). While considerable cultural diversity was identified within the sample, considering the small sample sizes of some groups, they were collapsed into broader cultural groupings² of First Peoples (83, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; Māori/Pacific Islander; African American), Asian/Eastern (201, Asian and Middle Eastern) and Anglo-Saxon (279, Australian and European).

Measures used in this survey identified issues related to:

- personal experiences of racism (Bodkin-Andrews, O'Rourke et al., 2010)
- identity through strength of self-identification (Phinney, 1992) and perceived respect from others (Bodkin-Andrews, O'Rourke et al., 2010)
- school self-perceptions through academic self-concept (Marsh, Ellis, Parada, Richards & Heubeck, 2005) and academic buoyancy (Martin & Marsh, 2008)

1 Roughly translated from D'harawal as 'Dream of understanding'.

2 It is requested that readers recognise the generality of these 'cultural groups' fails to represent the true cultural diversity within each group.

- emotional intelligence through emotional self-understanding, self-regulation and empathy (Bodkin-Andrews, 2011)
- school outcomes, including academic hopelessness (Bodkin-Andrews & Craven, 2008), English and maths self-ratings, and aspirations to go to university (adapted from Craven, Tucker, Munns, Hinkley, Marsh & Simpson, 2005).

The analyses conducted consisted of a range of preliminary Confirmatory Factor Analyses and Structural Equation Modelling techniques using MPLUS 7.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010). However, due to space limitations, the results will largely focus on latent interaction modelling (see Marsh, Wen & Hau, 2006 for an overview) to determine if the positive psychological constructs do act as agents of resilience.

Results and discussion

Based on the sample splitting of First Peoples, Anglo-Saxon and Asian/Eastern students, Table 1 reveals that, based on the multi-item racism measure (responses ranging from 1 = False to 6 = True), on average, most students disagreed with the proposition that they had experienced racism (with scores 3 or above indicating agreement).

Table 1 Mean scores and frequencies for racism-based measure

	Personal racism		
	Mean	SD	Frequency
First Peoples (n = 83)	2.79	1.66	53%
Anglo-Saxon (n = 279)	1.86	1.22	33%
Asian/Eastern (n = 201)	2.43	1.30	52%

Note: SD – standard deviation

However, these aggregate results may downplay potential experiences of racism, especially considering the nature of the items to form the combined factor (e.g. being called names, being ignored, etc.). Indeed, frequency analyses revealed that over 50 per cent of First Peoples and Asian/Eastern students experienced racism when the individual items were tallied.

With regards to the schooling outcomes, for university aspirations, 59 per cent of the First Peoples students,

Table 2 Mean scores for academic outcome measures

	Hopelessness		English ratings		Maths rating	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
First Peoples (n = 83)	2.59	1.31	3.43	.83	3.24	1.13
Anglo-Saxon (n = 279)	2.41	1.23	3.49	.82	3.25	.97
Asian/Eastern (n = 201)	2.71	1.30	3.49	.78	3.42	1.00

Table 3 Multi-group confirmatory factor analysis for racism and educational outcomes

	Standardised correlations				
	Racism	Hopelessness	English rating	Maths rating	University aspirations
Racism	1.00				
Hopelessness	.48*/.29*/.44*	1.00			
English rating	-.25*/-.09/-.16*	-.21 [^] /-.25*/-.24*	1.00		
Maths rating	-.19 [^] /-.12 [^] /-.08	-.22*/-.27*/-.22*	.45*/.32*/.27*	1.00	
University asp.	.08/-.22*/-.09	-.15/-.28*/-.32*	.00/.28*/.18*	-.04/.27*/.34*	1.00

Note: For standardised correlations First Peoples/Anglo-Saxon/Asian/Eastern. *p significant at .05, [^] p approaching significance at < .10.

53 per cent of the Anglo-Saxon students, and 76.1 per cent of the Asian/Eastern students aspired to go university after they left school. Table 2 reveals the mean scores for the remaining outcome variables, and it can be seen that all student groups, on average, disagreed with the proposition that they felt hopeless at school, and rated themselves positively in English and maths when compared to other students in their year.

Table 3 offers the standardised factor correlations between the racism measure and the student outcomes for all groups. These results suggest that greater experiences of racism are significantly associated with increased levels of hopelessness across all groups, lower level maths and English ratings for at least two of the cultural groups, and lower university aspirations for the Anglo-Saxon student group.

Positive identity, racism and schooling outcomes

Research on the link between identity and student outcomes has produced mixed results, with some evidence questioning its importance in the schooling system (Hattie, 2009), while other evidence has strongly attested to the worth of positive identity within the classroom (Purdie, Tripcony, Boulton-Lewis,

Fanshawe & Gunstone, 2000). Conceptualised not as a driver of success, but rather an agent of resilience, this investigation found a number of significant interactions between racism and the identity measures (see Figure 1).

The visual summary of the interactions in Figure 1 shows that while a stronger sense of identity seems to protect the First Peoples student group against feelings of hopelessness when they do not experience racism, these positive effects are negated when students experience high levels of racism. For the Anglo-Saxon students, the reverse interaction effect is identified, namely that both a stronger sense of cultural identity and multiculturalism (perceived cultural respect) seem to buffer the Anglo-Saxon students from the negative effects of racism.

Positive school self-perceptions, racism and schooling outcomes

Positive school self-perceptions have long been encouraged within the schooling environment, not only for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Bodkin-Andrews, Dillon & Craven, 2010; Craven &

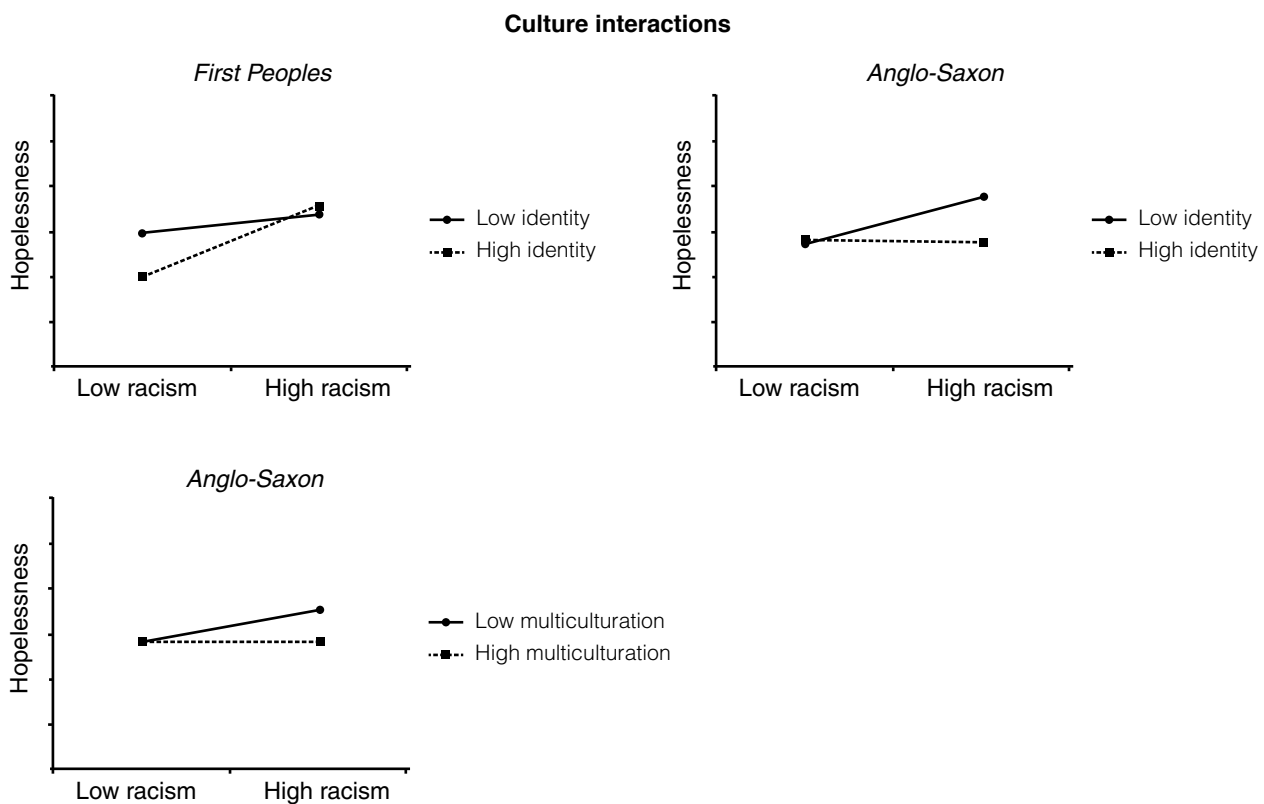


Figure 1 Significant latent interactions between the culture measures and racism

Self-perceptions interactions

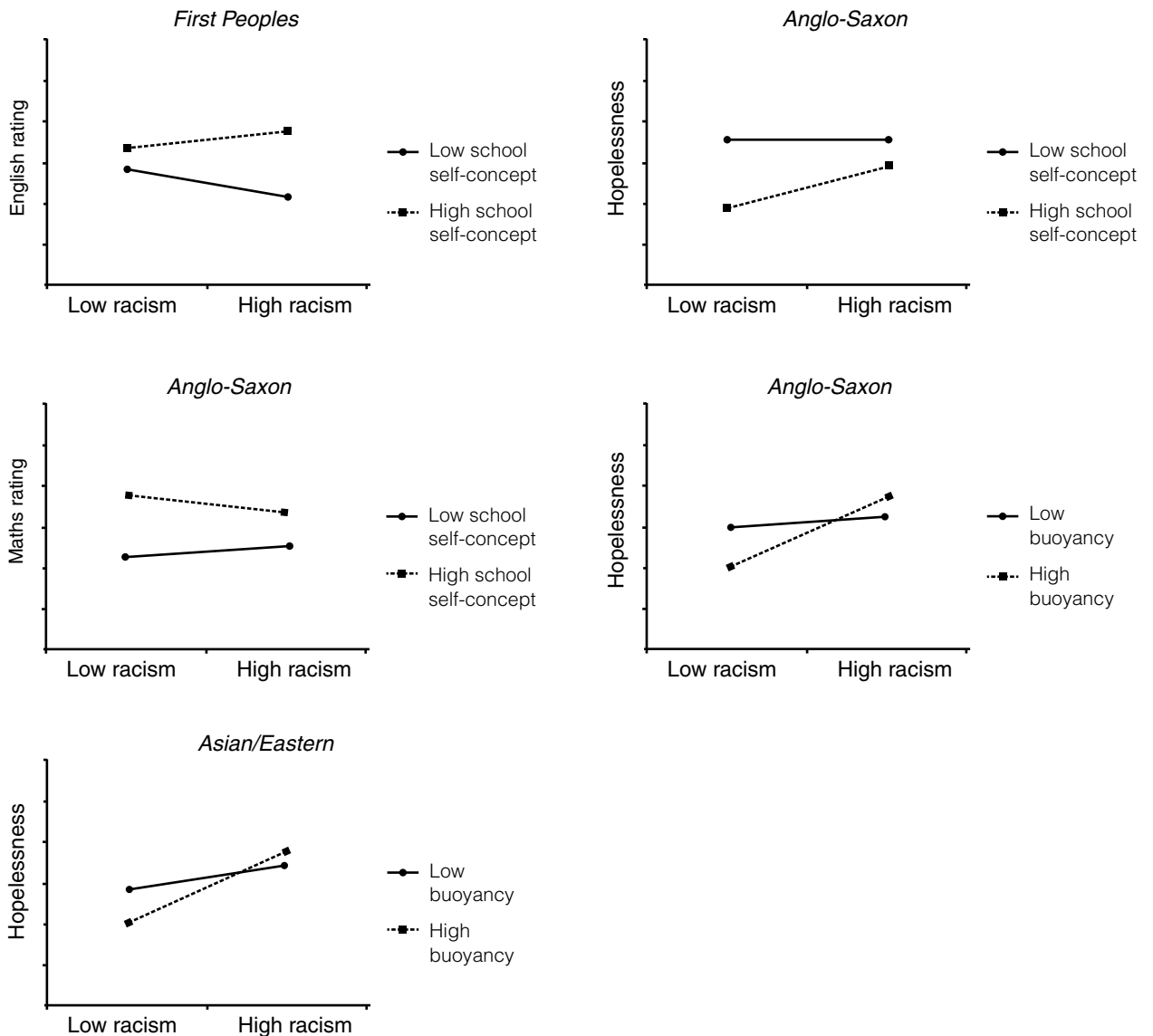


Figure 2 Significant latent interactions between the culture measures and racism

Marsh, 2008; Purdie et al., 2000), but for students from all cultural backgrounds (Huebner & Hills, 2011; Marsh & Martin, 2011). In this investigation, when testing positive school perceptions as agents of resilience, a range of significant interactions were identified across all student groups. The visual representation of the interactions in Figure 2 revealed that for the First Peoples student group and their English self-rating, not only did higher levels of school self-concept produce higher ratings when racism was low, but when racism was high, it negated the negative effects of racism to the extent that it may have reversed the effects of racism

(that is, the positive effects of self-concept were even stronger when racism was high). For the Anglo-Saxon student group, a series of significant interactions were identified which suggest that, in part, school self-concept may buffer (although not negate) the effects of racism over hopelessness and maths achievement, yet academic buoyancy, somewhat paradoxically, may exacerbate the impact of racism over hopelessness. The final interaction can be noted for the Asian/Eastern students, and this interaction mimics the possible exacerbating effects of buoyancy as identified for the Anglo-Saxon students.

Emotional intelligence, racism and schooling outcomes

The final set of positively oriented psychological measures centres on notions of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2001). While it may be argued that research (and opinion) on emotional intelligence has been predominantly popular in business and management literature, there has been an increasing push to recognise the value of emotional intelligence in schooling environments (Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan & Majeski, 2004), with some evidence suggesting that emotional intelligence may not only directly impact upon higher levels of achievement, but also interact with cognitive intelligence in its influence over achievement (Qualter, Gardner, Pope, Hutchinson & Whiteley, 2012). When the emotional intelligence factors were assessed as agents of resilience, an array of significant interactions were identified for all student groups (although these effects did not include empathy). In Figure 3, it can be seen that the sole significant effect for the First Peoples reveals that if racism levels were low, students with high levels of self-regulation were less likely to feel hopeless. When racism levels were high, although this effect was still apparent, the benefits of higher levels of self-regulation were not as noticeable (suggesting a weak buffering effect). For the Anglo-Saxon students, both significant interactions were over university aspirations, and suggest that as racism increased, higher levels of self-understanding and self-regulation buffered these students from the negative impact of racism. Finally, for the Asian/Eastern student group, the numerous interactions across the outcomes variables revealed a relatively consistent picture; that is, across hopelessness and English and maths self-ratings, the emotional intelligence constructs failed to buffer the students from the negative effects of racism, and in some instances may have exacerbated these effects (e.g. a higher sense of self-understanding resulted in worse maths self-rating if racism levels were high).

Overall, the results from Study 1 revealed that the range of interplay between the positive psychological factors and racism is potentially quite diverse, not only within student groups, but also between them. These findings suggest that any attempt to identify broad constructs that act as agents of resilience against racism may be futile, as there seems to be considerable variation across cultural groups in this study. The implications then are that resilience should be identified through a detailed and open exploration sensitive to the cultural groups examined. This is especially relevant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander research, as an increasing number of scholars are suggesting that research must be conducted from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lens, and not limited by the misconceptions that too often emerge from Western-based research lenses (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2013; Moreton-Robinson, 2011; Walter & Andersen, 2013).

Study 2: Bubalamai Bawa Gumada³– Healing the Wounds of the Heart project⁴

In this second study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 high-achieving and respected Aboriginal Australian representatives (including Elders, artists, academics, business owners and CEOs) across the Sydney Basin region. They freely spoke of their experiences of racism and how they combated racism throughout their lives. A number of key themes emerged with regard to possible agents of resilience. These are listed below.

Acknowledging racism. One of the strongest themes was the need to acknowledge racism and its impact within Australia. For example, one participant explained how racism influenced her self-perceptions:

As a victim of racism, I had automatically assumed that every non-indigenous person was automatically better than me ... I'm expecting that they will be superior to me in some way. (Senior lecturer)

She later explained that it was not until she was able to more fully educate herself about what racism is, and how it can be fought, that such negative self-perceptions were overcome.

Emotional distancing. All participants spoke of the need to emotionally distance themselves from racism, or externalise it, and often spoke of racism as a disease that someone else suffered from.

The person that makes that comment is a sick person. They are generally –

3 Roughly translated from D'harawal as 'Healing the wounds of the spirit'.

4 The following is largely drawn from Bodkin-Andrews, G. H., Newey, K., O'Rourke, V., & Craven, R. (2013).

Emotional intelligence interactions

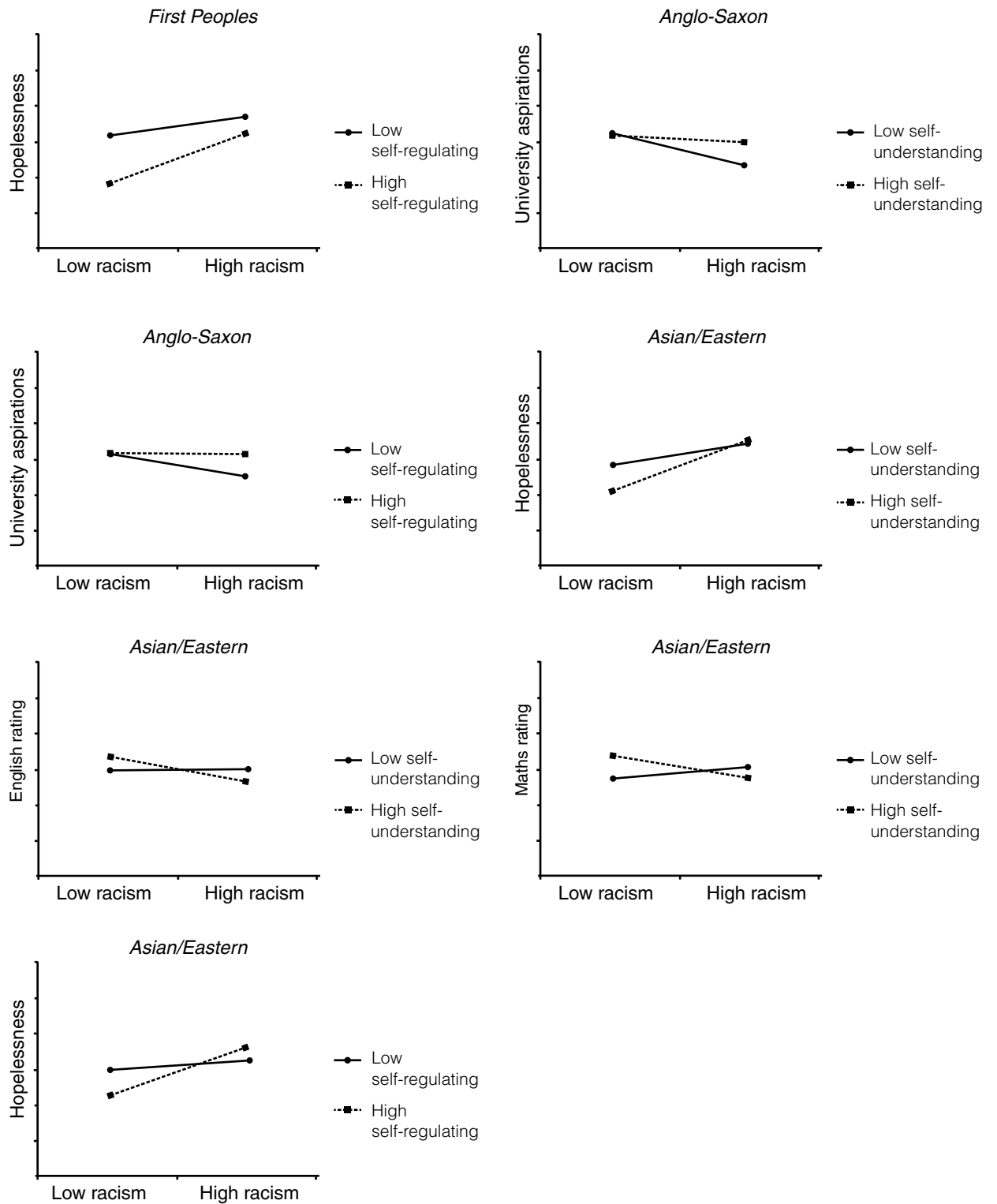


Figure 3 Significant latent interactions between the emotional intelligence measures and racism

they may be highly educated – but they're uneducated. (Professor)

Staying positive. Throughout all the interviews, the respondents spoke of the need to remain positive despite the tension that racism may cause.

Don't let the bastards grind you down. That was the one thing I would tell myself time after time ... I would just say that and try and just get a bit more resilient ... (University tutor, lecturer and business owner)

Sense of identity. Aligned to staying positive was the need to maintain the strength in one's own sense of Aboriginal identity. While most participants framed this theme as being proud of one's Aboriginality, an Elder explained that such pride comes from many sources.

... there are people before you who had fought for your rights ... Whether it was the Charlie Perkins of the world, whether it was your Nan, it is somebody who has stood up and said, we are who we are. We're Aboriginal and we will stand up and be counted ... (Elder)

Staying calm. While the immediate negative emotional impact of racism was recognised, no participant supported responding in a violent manner. Instead, it was argued that violent responses would merely perpetuate and reinforce racism.

The best advice I can give is count to 10 and take a big breath before you respond, because your response is going to be important to you for the rest of your life ... (Member of Parliament)

Seeking support. Many respondents spoke of having people they could turn to and trust, and speaking to them was often seen as a way to avoid tension.

Offload that incident immediately to your best friends. Do not hold it and let it fester. Have a joke with another Koori who will laugh with you ... Just disburse it from your system, disburse it from your being. (Chief Executive Officer)

Challenging racism. The final theme to emerge was arguably the most powerful and also drew on the strengths promoted by the previous strategies. With recognition of

the need to acknowledge racism comes the responsibility and motivation for action, for personal empowerment.

I had a headmistress at school who hated me – she hated my mum. After my mum died, she sent a letter home to my father saying that I may as well leave school ... That upset me ... I planned and I waited and waited and when I got my first degree ... I took it back to her and showed her ... The revenge is there. You don't have to be physical about it and you don't have to be nasty about it. You can just prove they're wrong. (Elder)

Conclusion

The voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people provide vital insights into buffering the impact of racism for both adults and youth. Whilst numerous strategies were identified within the interviews, there was no simple one-stop solution for mediating the negative effects of racism. These results suggest that it is critical that if research seeks to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, then it must take the time to hear the lived voices and wisdom within Aboriginal communities, and to then develop multiple strategies that may more accurately represent the needs and wants of these communities.

Note. A number of the Aboriginal participants agreed to be re-interviewed for the *Healing the Wounds of the Heart* documentary. This can be viewed at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0RosRz_HtQ.

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