Greetings,

A few months ago you participated in a study about race relations in Australia, and said that you would be interested in hearing about the results. We appreciate your help with our research, and we are happy to tell you about the findings. The study was conducted by Alison Sullivan under the supervision of Dr. Winnifred Louis. If you would like to ask questions, to comment on what you read, or to find out more, you can contact project staff by phoning (07) 3346 9515, by emailing w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au, or by writing to Dr. Winnifred Louis, School of Psychology, McElwain Building / University of Queensland / St. Lucia, QLD 4072. You can also read about other studies that we’ve done at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS:
Working paper, 27/02/07. This paper has not been peer reviewed. Please do not copy or cite without author’s permission.

WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR.
The current study aimed to investigate the effect that hate crime punishment had on racism. Specifically, we wanted to see if participants’ levels of racism would be affected by reading about a race-motivated hate crime that was either punished harshly or leniently. The theoretical basis for this study can be found in Lerner’s (1965) ‘just world theory’, and its recent successor ‘system justification theory’ (Jost & Banaji, 1994). The premise of these theories is that people like to believe that the world is a just and fair place, where good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to those that deserve it. Applying this to the criminal context, just world researchers have found that people blame the victims of crimes more harshly if the perpetrators are not severely punished (e.g., Hafer, 2000). Through just world theory we see that people, in their need to perceive the world as just and fair, will blame the victim so that it becomes ‘fair’ that the perpetrator got off lightly.

In the present study we hypothesised that if participants read about a race crime in which the perpetrator was not severely punished, not only would participants be more likely to blame the victim, but also to extend this negative assessment to the victim’s racial group. In this way participants who heard about an unpunished racially motivated crime would make the world cognitively ‘just and fair’ by blaming both the victim of the crime, and representing the victim’s group as deserving of poor treatment. The study specifically concerned a racially motivated crime, the murder of an Aboriginal Australian by a White Australian youth. Participants were presented with a vignette in which this hate crime was either harshly punished (secure world condition), or leniently punished (justice threat condition). Participants in both conditions read the vignette, and then were given a Stroop test, as well as a number of pen and paper questionnaire items. The questionnaire measured participants’ levels of victim blaming, attitudes towards Aboriginal Australians, perceptions of other Australians’ attitudes, and explicit concerns about justice.

The participants, as previously mentioned, were also given a Stroop test. A Stroop test is what is called an implicit measure. Implicit measures are designed to gauge attitudes that are either subconscious or innate. There are many social norms concerning what your attitudes to minority groups should be, and an implicit measure aims to bypass the effects of these norms, and get at your real attitudes. You will remember being given a list of words, and making a number of choices and responses to them. Your response times for these words were measured and coded, and a score was developed for this Stroop test, proposed to be an implicit measure of your justice concerns. Because of this implicit measure, each participant who completed the present study had to be tested individually.
SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS

From May 2006 through to August 2006, 110 people completed the study. Ninety of the participants were undergraduate psychology students, with the remaining ten students either volunteering or being compensated for participation. Fourteen participants did not identify as White/European and were omitted, leaving a final sample of 96. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 46, with a mean age of 21. The majority of participants, however, were 20 or younger (72%) and most of the participants were women (77%).

WHAT WE FOUND

1. VICTIM BLAMING. All participants read about the racially motivated murder of an Aboriginal boy, but half read a version in which the perpetrator of the hate crime was severely punished (secure world condition), whereas the other half read version in which the perpetrator was treated leniently (justice threat). When the perpetrator was treated leniently participants were more likely to derogate the victim, and to blame him for his own death.

2. ATTITUDES TOWARDS ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS. Those who received the vignette in which the hate crime perpetrator was treated leniently had higher scores on a scale measuring modern racism than did those who received the vignette in which the perpetrator was harshly and justly punished. Participants in the lenient (justice threat) condition were more likely to agree with items on the scale such as “Racism against Aboriginal people is no longer a problem in Australia”, and disagree with items such as “It is easy to understand the anger of Aboriginal people in Australia today.”

3. OTHER IMPLICIT AND EXPLICIT MEASURES. Results from the implicit measure, the Stroop test, and the other explicit measures which were expected to be affected by the justice threat were investigated, but the results were not conclusive. In particular, we found the activation of justice concerns in the Stroop task was not consistently affected by the manipulation, nor correlated with participants’ levels of victim blame or modern racism. In short, we found the victim blame effect, and we found that reading about a racial hate crime can lead to increased racism if the perpetrator isn’t punished, but we can’t explain why. The results will accordingly need to be followed up in future empirical studies.

CONCLUSION

In this study we investigated the just world hypothesis in the Australian context. We experimentally manipulated whether the perpetrator of a hate crime was justly punished or not in a ‘news story’ that participants read. When the perpetrator was not harshly punished, participants were more likely to blame the victim for the crime, and this extended to the victim’s group, with those in the justice threat condition more likely to demonstrate modern racism against Aboriginal Australians. These results have important theoretical and applied implications with the results informing us about the potentially detrimental effects on racial attitudes flowing from news of leniently treated racists, or hate crime perpetrators. The study is being followed up in the coming semester, with the aim being to further investigate the psychological mechanisms underlying the effects discussed herein.

THANKS AGAIN…

So that’s a description of what we found in this study. If you have any questions, or would like a copy of the longer write-up when we get that done (in several months) please get in touch. And thank you again for your participation and interest!