Greetings,

A few months ago you participated in a study about identity salience and attitudes of White Australians towards Indigenous Australians in the context of the Stolen Generations. At that time you 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 Emerald Quinn 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 on Australian social attitudes at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: IDENTITY SALIENCE AND THE STOLEN GENERATIONS: ATTITUDES OF WHITE AUSTRALIANS.
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WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR.
This study had two main aims. The first was to examine the effect of manipulating identity salience on White Australians’ attitudes to Indigenous Australians. White Australian participants were randomly assigned to one of two identity salience conditions. For those who were assigned to the human identity salience condition, the Stolen Generations was described as an event in which humans behaved heartlessly and ignorantly towards other humans. In the social identity condition, the Stolen Generations was described as an event in which White Australians behaved heartlessly towards Indigenous Australians. We were interested in the consequences of White Australians perceiving themselves and Indigenous Australians as distinct social groups (i.e., Indigenous Australians and White Australians) or as part of a single, inclusive category (i.e., humans). Past research has indicated that people are more likely to think positively towards members of their own social group. This would suggest then that when White Australian participants consider themselves and Indigenous Australians as one inclusive group, rather than as two distinct groups, they may feel less negatively towards today’s Indigenous Australians. Other research, however, has indicated that defining people at the more inclusive level may threaten valued subgroup identification. This would suggest, then, that when White Australian participants consider themselves and Indigenous Australians as one inclusive group, rather than as two distinct groups, they may in fact feel more negatively towards Indigenous Australians.

The second aim of the study was to investigate relationships between the attitudes and behaviours of White Australians towards Indigenous Australians with respect to the Stolen Generations. We were interested to see whether people’s attitudes towards Indigenous Australians in general would be associated with their beliefs about the role of collective guilt, apology and reparation towards the Indigenous population. We also investigated whether these beliefs translated into action by way of signing letters supporting a government apology to the Indigenous people, and the establishment of a treaty between White and Indigenous Australians.

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS
During early 2006, 94 White Australians completed the study. Participants were students from UQ, and were first year psychology students participating for course credit.
Participants ranged in age from 17 to 56 (but 75% were 19 or younger), and were predominantly female (83%).

WHAT WE FOUND

1. OVERALL RESULTS. Most participants (62%) stated that they felt that being a White Australian was important in their everyday life. About half of the participants (51%) agreed that White Australians should feel some collective guilt or ownership of the actions taken by their ancestors during the years of the Stolen Generation. Most respondents (66%) felt apologetic towards Indigenous Australians about those events. The vast majority of participants (93%) stated that they felt there was social distance between themselves and Indigenous Australians, for instance that they felt some difficulty interacting with Indigenous Australians. However, only 32% agreed that there were real differences between White Australians and Indigenous Australians. Most of the participants were unfamiliar with various campaigns by Indigenous Australians to assert their rights, with 60-70% stating that they had never heard of Invasion Day, National Healing Day or the Stolen Wages campaign.

2. LINKS BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS’ ATTITUDES, EMOTIONS AND BEHAVIOURS. As expected, there were links between participants’ attitudes towards Indigenous Australians and their views about ways to address the Stolen Generations issue. White Australians who held more positive attitudes towards Indigenous Australians in general were more likely to state that White Australians should feel guilty about the Stolen Generations, and were more apologetic about the issue. Those who felt more positive about Indigenous Australians were also more likely to believe in compensation and reparation for issues surrounding the Stolen Generations. This also translated into actual behaviour, with these people more likely to sign letters supporting apologising to and establishing a treaty with Indigenous Australians. There was no effect of age or gender on any of these views or behaviours in this particular sample.

3. INFLUENCE OF IDENTITY SALIENCE MANIPULATION. If the identity manipulation was effective it was expected that in the human identity condition (which emphasised that both social groups are human) participants would perceive greater similarities between themselves and Indigenous Australians. However, there was no difference between the human identity and social identity condition in terms of the how similar/different they perceived White and Indigenous Australians. This suggests that the experimental manipulation was not successful in altering identity salience. This was supported by the participants’ own ethnic group identification, such that participants in the human identity condition actually reported the same (or even more) identification with their ethnic group than did participants in the social identity salience condition. These results suggest that the identity salience manipulation was not effective.

CONCLUSION

In this study we were hoping to show that when the attention of White Australians is drawn to the similarities between different social groups (i.e., we are all human) they are more likely to report positive attitudes towards Indigenous Australians, as compared with when differences between the two social groups are emphasised. However, the manipulation was not effective, in that participants in the different identity salience conditions did not report different levels of perceived similarity between White and Indigenous Australians, and did not have different levels of ethnic group identification.
The study did reveal relationships between people’s attitudes and behaviours to do with Indigenous issues. Generally positive attitudes towards Indigenous Australians were associated with a greater belief in the collective guilt of the White Australian population and the need for compensation for the Indigenous community. In addition, these beliefs translated into observable behaviours, as those people with more positive attitudes were more likely to take steps (e.g., by signing a petition) supporting the plight of Indigenous Australians.

These findings have important implications for the debate currently underway in Australia as to the role of collective guilt in furthering the cause of Indigenous Australians. Some argue that, by taking on collective guilt and personal responsibility for the behaviours of Whites in the past, today’s White Australians are more likely to endorse restorative justice for Indigenous Australians. Others suggest that asking White Australians to take on retrospective guilt can only lead to anger, and hence is not beneficial to Indigenous Australians. Our study supports the former argument, by suggesting that those individuals who feel more guilt and an onus to apologise are more likely to support (both in terms of attitudes and actual behaviours) reparation to Indigenous Australians. These are interesting results that we are following up in other work.

One of the additional studies that we did was to conduct a similar study with Indigenous Australians. A summary of this is online at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/, as well as by mail request from the author (contact info above). But the gist of it is that the human to human issue frame had an impact on Indigenous Australians, compared to the White vs Aboriginal Australian frame. When Indigenous Australians thought of the Stolen Generations as a human-to-human issue, they identified less as Indigenous Australians, expressed more forgiveness towards White/European Australians, and reported lower intentions to engage in collective action. It is somewhat depressing that the human-to-human condition seems to have the effect of making the people who were disadvantaged more psychologically inclusive and less politically militant, whilst the people who are advantaged continue in their original views unchanged.

We continue to explore interventions which will promote Reconciliation between Indigenous Australians and White/European Australians in our present work.

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!