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Attitudes toward Indigenous Australians: The issue of “Special Treatment”

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Reference
Abstract.

Previous research has found that people who report negative attitudes toward Indigenous Australians also report acceptance of false beliefs such as “being Indigenous entitles you to more social security benefits”. In the present study, we were interested in examining negative attitudes toward Indigenous Australians across three Western Australian locations, and comments spontaneously generated by participants regarding what is known in the literature as “false beliefs”. To do this, we measured negative attitudes toward Indigenous Australians and content analysed responses to an open-ended question collected from 633 community members. Four categories relating to special treatment for Indigenous Australians were found in the form of Government handouts, education, the legal system, and housing. Participants who reported that they saw Indigenous Australians receiving special treatment were significantly more negative in their attitudes compared to participants who did not. Although some special treatment themes had some validity; others did not. We discuss the circumstances surrounding Indigenous disadvantage which may be viewed by some as preferential treatment. The present study adds to previous work by identifying what issues of “special treatment” are generated by participants without specific prompting. By identifying these themes, and bringing them into the public forum, this may have a significant effect on reducing negative attitudes toward Indigenous Australians.
The European colonization of Australia over the past two centuries has resulted in the dispossession, alienation, and impoverishment of the Indigenous peoples of Australia. As a result of this colonization, Indigenous Australians suffer from disadvantages such as shortened life expectancy, increased rates of disability, lack of formal education, decreased labour force participation, less income earned, less home ownership, increased health issues, higher rates of suicide especially for young men, and increased imprisonment rates (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision [SCRGSP], 2005). While there has been recent improvement on some indicators (e.g., labour force participation, unemployment, home ownerships, and education) other areas show a decline (e.g., victim rates for crime; substantiated child protection notifications, and imprisonment rates). Overall, many indicators show little or no movement (SCRGSP, 2005).

Indigenous Australians also experience ongoing prejudice and discrimination as a marginalised minority group (see, for example, Mellor, 2003; Pedersen, Beven, Walker & Griffiths, 2004). Understanding the antecedents of such prejudice, and attempting to redress them, is particularly important given the link between the perception of prejudice and a variety of disadvantageous outcomes for Indigenous people (see South Australian Health Commission, 1991). Certainly, research suggests that Indigenous Australians are very much aware of prejudice directed toward them. A recent study found that reported prejudice experienced by Indigenous Australians was more than twice that of other Australians in the workplace, over twice that of other Australians in the education system, approximately four times that of other Australians in dealings with police and when seeking accommodation (Dunn, Forrest, Pe-Pua & Smith., 2005). These authors
found that racism in everyday life was experienced by 43% of Indigenous Australians compared with approximately 25% of other non-Indigenous Australians.

Some prejudice studies have a specific focus on what is known in the literature as negative “false beliefs” (e.g., Pedersen, Contos, Griffiths, Bishop, & Walker, 2000). This focus stems from the work of early researchers such as Allport (1954) who argued that prejudice is strongly linked with faulty and inflexible generalizations. Three commonly endorsed false beliefs about Indigenous people, identified in the literature, are that being Indigenous entitles them to receive more welfare payments than non-Indigenous people, that the Commonwealth Government helps them make loan repayments on cars, and that Indigenous people are more likely to drink alcohol than are non-Indigenous people. That these beliefs are false has been made quite clear in a Commonwealth Government publication entitled ‘Rebutting the Myths’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992); also see Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (1996). These beliefs are also discussed in full in Pedersen et al. (2000). Pedersen et al. examined the prevalence of the three false beliefs noted above. When asked directly, the majority of participants in their study rated one or more of the false statements outlined above as true.

Furthermore, false beliefs have been linked with prejudice toward Indigenous Australians (Batterham, 2001; Pedersen et al., 2000; Pedersen et al., 2004). Given this, it would be reasonable to assume that correcting false beliefs may reduce prejudice. In fact, Batterham found that participants whose false beliefs were challenged scored significantly lower on a prejudice scale against Indigenous Australians compared with a control group.
In the Pedersen et al (2000) study, there was a strong emphasis on “equity” reported by respondents which the authors interpreted within the context of the modern prejudice construct. That is, many non-Indigenous Australians believe that Indigenous Australians have the right to equality, but they are perceived as wanting more rights than anybody else (also see McConahay & Hough, 1976). As long ago as 1970, a study of the attitudes of Western Australians toward Aborigines found that “…respondents stressed the idea that Aborigines should be treated equally with Whites rather than being made special cases” (Taft, 1970, p.17). Such a view appears to be widely held still, and remains a salient issue. Discourse analysis studies have also discussed this link between prejudice and supposed equity (e.g., Augoustinos, Tuffin & Every, 2005; Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Sale, 1999).

The present study. It would appear that some consensually shared false beliefs as outlined in the literature involve the issue of special treatment (for example, perceptions that Indigenous people get benefits that non-Indigenous people do not). To date, research on false beliefs about Indigenous Australians has used quantitative measures, where participants rated whether they believed each of a range of statements to be true, and this is useful. However, asking participants to endorse or reject specific beliefs could possibly inflate responding. That is, participants might endorse beliefs they would not normally think about in relation to Indigenous Australians. In the present study, we were interested to know which beliefs were produced without such specific prompting. A survey method was used in which participants first provided an open-ended statement in which participants described their attitude to Indigenous Australians. They then rated
their attitude to Indigenous Australians on an established rating scale, the Attitudes toward Indigenous Australians Scale (the “ATIA”). Content analysis was used to identify the number of times special treatment was mentioned in the open-ended responses, and the relationship between mentioning special treatment and attitude valence on the ATIA was tested.

We note the complexities surrounding the notion of supposed special treatment (e.g., equal opportunities legislation) and its relationship to the wider social milieu; these are considered in the Discussion section of this paper. We further note that some “false belief” statements are capable of a number of interpretations, not simply concerning issues of truth or falsity, and may be seen as a “frame” rather than a “false belief”. We are unaware of any research that has examined this issue empirically and hope to shed light on this question in our study.

Method

Procedure/Participants.

A sample of 2,400 residents from three Western Australian locations, 800 from each, was drawn randomly from the 2004 phone book (Perth, Kalgoorlie, Albany). Perth is the capital city of Western Australia, Kalgoorlie is a regional centre for gold-mining, and Albany is a rural centre. Questionnaires were mailed to potential respondents with a covering letter, and two weeks later a reminder letter was mailed. Respondents were not contacted in any other way. The response rates from Albany, Kalgoorlie, and Perth were 35%, 21% and 30% respectively. In total, 653 people sent in completed questionnaires, giving a response rate of 27%, and 633 (97%) filled in the open-ended question.
Participants seemed fairly representative of the community in general: they came from a cross-section of society and there was little difference between groups of participants from the three locations. After cross-checking the sample’s characteristics, no significant difference was found between our three locations with respect to such variables as formal education and gender. The only demographic that varied was average age (the average age in Albany was 57, the average age in Kalgoorlie was 46, and the average age in Perth was 54). However, because age was not correlated with attitudes when education was partialled out, no adjustments for age were made in the analyses. There was only one Indigenous person who responded to the questionnaire; however, she did not espouse any false beliefs and as a result her data was not part of the main analysis.

Measures.
The analysis regarding false beliefs comes from responses to an open-ended question given by respondents prior to rating their attitude to Indigenous Australians on the ATIA. The specific question asked in the survey was: “In the space below, please describe how you feel about Australian Aborigines. Please indicate why you feel the way you do. That is, please describe and explain your attitude towards Australian Aborigines. Write down all of your thoughts and feelings that are relevant to your attitude and try to describe the reasons for your feelings”. Six lines were provided for responses. This response was deliberately kept brief so that the most psychologically salient thoughts about the issue would be recorded.
False Beliefs. A list of false beliefs which had previously been identified in the literature (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1996) formed a preliminary coding scheme (see Appendix 1). This approach is consistent with past research using content analytic methods (see, for example, Ahuvia, 2001; Neuman, 2006). The occurrence of each identified false belief in the responses to the open-ended question was recorded. Any other theme not previously identified in the literature but appearing in the data - if reported by more than 5 participants - was included in the coding scheme.

To ensure the reliability of the coding scheme, 10% of the data were independently coded by a second rater. No significant discrepancies in the coding of the data were identified.

The ATIA scale. This scale was taken from Pedersen et al. (2004) which reports reliabilities of $\alpha = .91$ and $\alpha = .92$ in the two studies outlined in that paper. In the present analysis, however, we excluded two items from that scale that were close to false beliefs about special treatment, giving a total of 16 items instead of the usual 18.

Results.
Consistent with past research, the ATIA showed good internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.90$). The ATIA scores were allocated to three categories. Those respondents whose scores were equal to or less than 3.5 were classified as “Positive” (35.2%); those whose scores were greater than 3.5 and equal to or less than 4.5 were classified as “Neutral” (28.8%), and those with scores greater than 4.5 were classified as “Negative” (36%).

Mean scores on the ATIA by location are shown in Table 1. Kalgoorlie residents were significantly more negative toward Indigenous Australians than Perth residents, but
there was no difference between Albany respondents and those in Perth and Kalgoorlie ($F(2,647) = 5.59, p = .004$).

(Insert Table 1 about here)

Content analysis. Overall, 11.5% (n=73) of participants reported the perception that being Indigenous entitled a person to more privileges than if you were not Indigenous. Some made a general comment on the topic (n = 31), and the rest provided specific examples. Some of the examples of special treatment had been identified in previous studies of false beliefs (e.g., Indigenous people get a free car/bike) but there were other examples (e.g., Indigenous children get paid to go to school) which were not explicitly covered within the confines of our “false beliefs”. It is noted now that the data proved very complicated from a viewpoint of ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’; therefore, from this point on we simply refer to the “false beliefs” as “beliefs”.

There was no significant difference across locations in how many people mentioned special treatment (chi-square (3df) = .555, $p = .907$). These beliefs about special treatment can be broken up loosely into four categories (see Table 2) with the most common category involving the belief that Indigenous people are advantaged through handouts, through educational assistance, through special treatment in the legal system, and through housing.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

Attitudes toward Indigenous Australians and “special treatment” beliefs. The mean ATIA score of those who mentioned special treatment was significantly higher ($M=4.67; SD=.99$) than the mean of those who did not ($M=3.91; SD=1.23$), $F(1,648) = 25.69, p <$
Therefore, attitudes to Indigenous Australians were more negative among those who spontaneously reported special treatment.

Discussion

Three main points emanate from the present study. First, a significant minority of participants saw Indigenous Australians as receiving special treatment compared with other Australians. Second, the belief in special treatment was significantly related to negative attitudes. Finally, over a third of our respondents reported a negative view of Indigenous Australians which has serious practical implications. These findings will now be discussed.

What is particularly relevant for the purposes of this paper is the issue of fairness and equity (this was also found and discussed in Pedersen et al., 2000). Overall, 11.5% of participants mentioned special treatment of Indigenous Australians as being a concern for them. Is this an important enough finding for a serious discussion? We believe so. Importantly, the findings reported are conservative. This research was designed to provide a strong test of beliefs regarding special treatment and its association with prejudice. The comments were made without participants being specifically asked about special treatment. If this number of people mention it spontaneously in such a short response space (they were only given six lines), we can assume it is highly salient in their attitude regarding Indigenous Australians. As shown in previous research (e.g., Pedersen et al, 2000), many more people endorse such beliefs when specifically asked.
Handouts. The most common theme found was the belief that Indigenous people receive more government assistance (frequently referred to by respondents as “handouts”) than other Australians. Before moving onto the more frequently cited themes within this section, some of the more extreme beliefs are worth mentioning. For example, one participant bemoaned the fact that “Money (is) handed freely for attending funerals” and “$8,000 (was) paid for daughter’s wedding”. This type of belief has also been found by other researchers such as Bergin (2002). In Bergin’s work, one participant stated: “They want equal rights but get paid to go to school, paid to go to funerals, paid to get married, have hire purchases paid off”. Finally, another rather interesting belief is that Indigenous people “get paid to … own a dog”. Again, this beliefs is not a ‘once-off’. In Bergin’s study, one participant said “They generally just get away with too much stuff. I once heard that aboriginals get an allowance for having dogs, if this is true why don’t the white people? Basically, as Australians I think we should all be treated equally”.

Although the “dog myth” is less common than the themes discussed below, it is important for anti-racism strategists to be aware of these more extraordinary views so these can be addressed in, say, anti-racism seminars.

More common beliefs frequently cited are now considered. One theme which was relevant in past research involved social security. As one participant noted in the present study, “I think they actually get treated better in the Courts and also by the Social Security”. The issue of preferential treatment in the Courts will be dealt with in a later section. The social security benefits belief has been identified in past research. For example Pedersen et al. (2000) found that the false belief that being Indigenous entitles a person to more social security benefits was extremely common; approximately two-thirds
of their participants were incorrect on this point. It would be prudent to investigate where this particular belief originates from. Pedersen, Clarke, Dudgeon and Griffiths (2005) report that a representative of Centrelink noted that this belief could have come about due to the situation where some Indigenous people have asked for their pension to be given every week rather than every fortnight. It was thought that this was, in turn, often mistakenly viewed by non-Indigenous welfare recipients as evidence that Indigenous people receive double the benefits. In fact, when searching the Centrelink website, there is a section for Indigenous people, to help them see what they may be entitled to (Centrelink, 2005a). Once there, they are directed to benefits that everyone is entitled to for based on income, availability for work and so forth.

Another false belief found in the present study was the “car myth” noted by the Commonwealth of Australia (1992). As one of our participants stated, “They seem to get a lot of handouts, houses, cars, money for going to School”. The prevalence of the “car myth” was investigated by Pedersen et al (2000) who found that approximately one-third of their participant group reported that Indigenous people can get their car paid off by the Government.

Thus, the two false beliefs noted in Pedersen et al (2000) using a quantitative rating scale was also reported by some of our participants. The present study adds to that study by noting the less common false beliefs such as Indigenous people getting paid to go to funerals and weddings. We now move onto the next most common theme spontaneously generated by our participants:
2. **Education.** The primary belief noted by participants under this category was that Indigenous children receive benefits that non-Indigenous children do not. For example, “I have a problem that there seems to be a set of standards, especially for Aboriginals, that we are not exposed to e.g. school uniforms, books, being paid to go to school and children of Aboriginal background receiving free breakfast and lunches that underprivileged whites do not receive”. The “being paid to go to school” theme has also occurred in past research (e.g., Bergin, 2002). This belief may stem from the fact that there is means-tested assistance for Indigenous children who are attempting to remain at school under difficult circumstances by way of Abstudy (this is not the case under Austudy). Yet it should be noted that there is also assistance given to other disadvantaged children in forms such as Youth Allowance and Assistance for Isolated Children (Centrelink, 2005b).

   It is important to deal with the higher education sector as a follow-through, and in particular with any differentiation between Abstudy and Austudy. This provides clear understanding and comparison of benefits that are available both groups. Regardless of age, independent students (single, no children) receive the same they are Indigenous or whether they are not. Having said that, there are some incentives for Indigenous people to study. For example, over the age of 21, there is a $2.70 difference per fortnight between long-term unemployed, single people who start full time study under Austudy and Indigenous students (Centrelink, 2005a). Additionally, undergraduate Indigenous students in higher education are entitled to tutorial support from the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme.
While much of the beliefs about special treatment held by participants in the present study are based on unfounded information, the preceding are examples of various strategies to involve Indigenous people in mainstream institutions. Given the discrepancies between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in educational achievement, school retention, and higher education (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC], 2003), and the level of racism experienced by Indigenous people in the education system (Dunn et al., 2005), the provision of strategies aimed at inclusion can be seen as an attempt to achieve fairness rather than being considered a “handout” (in fact; this could be argued to be the case with respect to all “special treatments”). Furthermore, it should also be noted that programmes exist in all universities – in line with the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) - for people who are members of marginalised and/or disadvantaged groups such as those with disabilities. Here, as occurs with Indigenous Australians, universities are mandated to facilitate access to mainstream education and provide support for people with disabilities. Additionally, some universities provide programmes for other disadvantaged groups. For example, at the campus of the first author, support is given to those with limited financial means, women in male-dominated professions, people in rural locations, and people for whom English is a second language (Murdoch University, 2005).

3. **Legal system.** Another theme which was noted by the participants was that Indigenous Australians benefited unfairly from Australia’s legal system. For example, “I am fed up with hearing how the Aborigines are hard done by. I think they actually get
treated better in the Courts and also by the Social Security. Over many years I have heard one set of rules for Aborigines and one for whites. Why?”

There were two issues in the Legal Category stemming from this category that are particularly relevant to the present paper. The first issue in this category involved the perception that Indigenous people had more rights in law. For example, “The Native Title Act has also highlighted that one type of Australian – (Aboriginals) have more rights in law than I (non-Aboriginal Australian). This makes me sad as I have always believed in equality for all Australians – yet here are a race saying they have more rights than me”.

This comment relates to the Mabo case in 1992 where the High Court rejected the doctrine of terra nullius and found that Indigenous people who have a continued connection with their land may hold native title (HREOC, 2003). However, native title does not have priority over other land titles, and at times the two can co-exist.

Importantly, native title only covers traditional land. Whether this is seen as ‘special treatment’ depends entirely on one’s personal political stance. For the participant cited, it is seen as giving unfair special treatment. The perception that this is “special treatment”, however, is a matter of perspective. Another view is that native title is not, in fact, a new or an extra right. For native title to be recognised by the Australian Courts, an Indigenous group must prove, through a rigorous process of providing comprehensive anthropological, historical and genealogical information, that they continue to hold rights to a particular area of land under a shared system of Indigenous law and custom that they and their predecessors have observed since European sovereignty through to the present. Further, their native title rights can only be recognised over areas where they do not clash with the legal rights of others granted under Australia's Western system of land tenure.
(e.g., native title cannot be recognised over freehold land). Only in these circumstances can an Indigenous group be recognised as having continued to hold native title rights since sovereignty. In short, from a legal perspective, Indigenous people are not entitled to more rights than others; MABO has simply established in law that the rights they have always held under Indigenous law can finally be recognised under Australian law (see, for example, HREOC, 2003; Office of Native Title, 2005). Unfortunately, there are high levels of misinformation/misunderstanding in the general community about native title.

The second issue involves leniency of sentencing. Some participants reported that Indigenous Australians received more lenient sentencing as noted by this participant: “I think it (sic) unfair that Aboriginals get better privileges ... They also have lenient sentence when they are caught for doing something wrong. I think this is unfair.” Statistics do indicate that Indigenous prisoners serve shorter sentences; however, this is likely to be a reflection of the types of offences committed rather than preferential treatment based on race (Law Reform Commission, 2000).

Although the Australian Institute of Criminology used to do statistics showing average sentencing for different types of crime, with comparisons between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, they have stopped providing this particular analysis. However, in a report published by the Law Reform Commission (2000), it is clear that when sentencing the cultural background of an Aboriginal offender should be taken into account:

“The cultural or social background of the offender may be a relevant consideration. Aboriginality does not of itself mean that an offender will automatically receive special or lenient treatment, since it may have no bearing on the commission of the offence. However, in some cases the sentencing judge may decide that, because of an offender’s Aboriginality, he or she has been so
disadvantaged that it would be unfair not to take this into consideration in determining the level and type of sentence to be imposed” (n.p.).

As previously mentioned, Indigenous disadvantage is profound compared with other Australians (SCRGSP, 2005). Yet the background of non-Indigenous offenders is also taken into account. For example, if an offender comes from a dysfunctional background, this may be viewed by the Court as a mitigating factor and therefore reduces the offender’s culpability and sentence length. For example, Berman and Hulme (2004) note that circumstances such as motivation (e.g., robbery to feed a drug habit), mental state (e.g., intention is more serious than recklessness), mental illness, intellectual disability, extreme youth, or a history of sexual abuse impinge upon the offender’s moral culpability. Thus, not only are Indigenous people’s background and circumstances are taken into account when sentencing but other Australians as well.

Considering the proportion of Indigenous people in prison, it is important to note that not only are Indigenous people over-represented in prison (HREOC, 2003), but this over-representation is increasing over time (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). Further, given the level of racism experienced by Indigenous people in dealings with the police (Dunn et al., 2005), to have a belief within Australian society that Indigenous people actually benefit from that very system is erroneous.

4. **Housing.**

Many of the participants in the present study felt that Indigenous people had housing given to them, and that they did not look after their houses. For example, “I feel they are given far too much for no return. If they do not want to look after what they are given
they should not be given another few thousand dollars worth of housing and cars to wreck and then ask for more. The average Australian white person does not get anything near this.”

First, the belief that Indigenous people ‘do not pay rent’ needs to be addressed. As one participant said, “I feel that most Aboriginal do not live as we do so therefore should not live among us (homes are dirty, don’t pay rent, in Ministry of Housing homes, commit crime, have hate for other Western Australians”. The assertion that Indigenous people do not pay rent is incorrect. Indigenous people do pay rent; further, they have to meet eligibility criteria for Homeswest as does everybody else.

Second, the belief regarding the mis-use of property was seen as relevant; for example, “…they are given houses by Homeswest and other places and they miss use (sic) them. For example if it gets cold and have no wood they pull the floor boards up ... you try and help them and they throw it back in your face”. It is difficult to know what is meant by “given houses”. As noted, Indigenous peoples rent like everyone else. As for mis-using the property, this is difficult to address specifically. Homeswest statistics do give higher rate of “tenant liability” for Indigenous tenants. Homeswest also spends more on maintenance for dwellings where Indigenous people live. Yet according to Equal Opportunity Commission (2004a) (EOC), Indigenous households tend to be more overcrowded thus increasing depreciation. The EOC report noted that that one nuclear family gets evicted or is homeless so end up living with other family members which overcrowds that house. The report also noted that situations can occur such as a family funeral, and people out of town come to stay. Suddenly, there are lots of people are there, leading to complaints. Finally, the EOC reports that often the worst houses are given to
Indigenous people, that regular maintenance isn’t done, and that the inspection report that is completed when people move in does not note things that need fixing. There have been cases where when people moved out, they are given bills of thousands of dollars to fix what was broken before the tenant moved in, or to fix something that the tenant had requested many times to be repaired during the tenancy. These facts would certainly go a long way in explaining the public perception of mis-use.

Third, there was an impression by some participants of the present study that Indigenous people who purchased their houses had subsidies; for example, “I used to work with a part Aboriginal Foreman at work who was earning a very good wage and was subsidized for the new (lavish) house he built. I’m not jealous but to me and others it seemed a little unjust. P.S. his wife also worked”. There is a bilateral Commonwealth/State program to assist Indigenous people, mainly in remote areas to build housing and, to a lesser degree, assists Indigenous people in urban areas also. Yet overall, Indigenous people are less likely to own their homes compared with other Australians. While 32% of Indigenous Australians were home owners in the 2001 census, 69% of other households were homeowners (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). As SCRGSP (2005) notes, home ownership is an important indicator of wealth and that although ownership rates are rising, a significantly smaller amount of Indigenous people live in their own houses compared with other Australians.

In summary, it could be argued that discrimination is directed toward Indigenous people rather than the other way round with respect to housing. According to EOC (2004), Indigenous people are exposed to discrimination in two forms – direct and indirect. In this context, direct discrimination refers to an Indigenous person being
discriminated against because of her or his Aboriginality. Indirect discrimination may seem fair in intent and form, but proves discriminatory with respect to outcome and impact; this includes systematic practices. Yet it is argued that indirect discrimination is capable of permeating the procedures and practices of housing organisations and importantly may “reside in the unconsciousness of individuals” (p. 11). This conclusion is also supported by the level of racism experienced by Indigenous people when attempting to access housing (Dunn et al., 2005). The findings of the present study would seem to support this latter assertion.

Relationship between negative attitudes and beliefs about Indigenous special treatment.

Participants who reported that Indigenous people receive special treatment when compared with other Australians scored significantly higher on the ATIA. In fact, one participant noted the link between the two constructs: “I am sorry to say that I would be prejudiced because I believe that the Aboriginals of today have so much given to them. They get the best of Government housing, buses to travel, businesses and buildings that cater for same. Money for nothing”.

The findings are not surprising. Literature with respect to modern prejudice posits that this form of prejudice is subtle, covert, and involves individualistic values (Pedersen & Walker, 1997). This type of prejudice ignores both historical and social contexts. The implication from opinions such as the one cited above is that all Australians are individuals, we should all be treated the same, yet Indigenous people are treated better. Given that the ATIA is highly correlated with modern prejudice (Bergin, 2002), a relationship between prejudice and perceptions of special treatment is to be
expected. These results indicate the necessity of dealing with such issues if Australia is to become a country less troubled by negative community attitudes toward Indigenous Australians. As noted by Bobo (1988), values contained in racial attitudes are socio-culturally based (also see the distinction by Jones, 1997, between individual, institutional and cultural racism). Australia today prides itself on egalitarianism; however, values such as these can keep the privileges of the dominant group protected (see Pedersen & Walker, 1997).

Conclusions and Implications. The fact that over one-third of our respondents reported a negative view of Indigenous Australians is of grave concern. The racism experienced by Indigenous Australians is well documented; and this can be seen in explicit derogatory name-calling such as ‘boongs’ and ‘animals’ as outlined in Doolan, Dudgeon and Fielder (2000). Mellor (2003) has also described the experience of prejudice, often overt, against Indigenous Australians (in his study, Koories). As noted by Pedersen et al (2004), today’s prejudice involves both subtle and blatant components. Prejudice against Indigenous Australians is undeniable.

The study by South Australian Health Commission (1991) described in the Introduction regarding the relationship between the experience of prejudice and health indicates the depth of the problem. One Perth study which examined the perception of prejudice among Indigenous children found a disturbingly large proportion of Indigenous children, almost half in fact, perceived that the wider community didn't like them (Pedersen with Dudgeon, 2003). This indicates that the problem facing Indigenous Australians has significant implications for the next generation as well as this one.
However, we are not arguing here that the issue of clarifying and/or justifying “special treatment” is the only way to deal with such racism; it is not. What our data indicate is that beliefs about special treatment is part of larger issue concerning ignorance and lack of tolerance, and the battle against racism needs to be fought on many different fronts including this one.

Importantly, the antecedents underlying such attitudes need to be addressed. Given that our participants who scored high on the ATIA were more likely to report a belief in “special treatment”, educationalists would be well advised to consider “special treatment” beliefs when attempting to implement anti-racist strategies. These findings are in line with previous research. For example, Augoustinos et al. (2005) found that participants relied on constructs such as “egalitarianism” when making decisions about Indigenous Australians. These authors further found the notion “everyone should be treated equally or the same”- irrespective of their background - was common. Similarly, previous research such as Pedersen et al. (2000) found that many participants felt aggrieved about benefits they perceived as being afforded specifically to Indigenous Australians such as special social security benefits. However, the present research takes that finding further by elaborating on the role of ‘special benefits’. For example, in the extract given under “the Legal System”, a participant wrote about a belief that the Court system benefited Indigenous people, obviously not taking into account the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system (see HREOC, 2003). Further, as that report points out, rather than Indigenous Australians being the advantaged group in Australian society, they are disadvantaged in almost all measures of Western well-being (SCRGSP, 2005).
In short, many salient beliefs about “special treatment” had no truth in it whatsoever. Here, myths are simply that: myths. Conversely, in some instances, Indigenous people do receive “special treatment” and this needs to be openly discussed especially in forums designed to address prejudice against Indigenous peoples. For example, there are some equal opportunity strategies that recognizes underlying disadvantage and seeks to address it. As the HREOC (2003) report states, the need for remedial action arises because many Indigenous Australians under-use mainstream services compared with other Australians. Further, as discussed earlier, it should be acknowledged that other disadvantaged groups in Australia also receive aid in an attempt to ‘level out the playing field’ (e.g., those with disabilities). In this regard, a distinction can be made between formal equality which “prescribes equal treatment of all people regardless of circumstance” and substantive equality which “involves achieving equitable outcomes as well as equal opportunity. It takes into account past discrimination … “(Equal Opportunities Commission, 2004b, p. 6).

Another point that needs to be made before concluding is that by its very nature research on prejudice and discrimination is negative. This paper sets out the relationship between negative attitudes toward Indigenous Australians and what is seen as Indigenous “special treatment”. As such, all quotes presented in this paper are negative which can give a false impression of a nation which is overwhelmingly negative. That is not the case. Some comments were positive in nature such as “I regard Aboriginal culture as an asset to Australians and Australia” and “Aboriginal Australians are just a group of people whose skin is different to mine and have different ways of doing things”.

23.
However, as shown, there is still a great deal of negativity that needs addressing in our society.

This paper concludes with one participant’s views on Indigenous “special treatment”: “If we are ever to have a non-racist Australia we need to forget that we are Aboriginal or ‘white’ and that we are simply people. I feel that the ‘do-gooders’ make things worse by giving Aboriginals special treatment and that things such as Art Competitions etc for only Aboriginals are wrong. In fact they are racist!” As discouraging as these comments may be, they do pave the way for practical strategies to reduce prejudice. For those participants with negative attitudes toward Indigenous Australians, the perception that a “fair go” is not happening for them is something that can be addressed. For example, by pointing out that a level playing field does not exist in so many ways (education; health; housing), it may help change attitudes toward Indigenous Australians in a more positive direction. As Supratik Mukherji (2005, private communication) puts it, the issue of special treatment can be likened to a 400 metre race where there is a staggered start. The reason some people get a start involves the smoothing out of curves which advantage some people and disadvantage others. The same logic can be put to the issue of Indigenous “special treatment”. However, in the case of Indigenous disadvantage, the stakes are very much higher.
Author notes. Correspondence should be addressed to Anne Pedersen at the School of Psychology, Murdoch University, Murdoch, WA, 6150, Australia (email address A.Pedersen@murdoch.edu.au). We gratefully thank our research assistant Sue (Myth Buster) Hoffman for coding and inputting the data, and for insightful comments on an earlier draft. We also thank Natalie Contos, Susan Hansen, Farida Tilbury, and Paul Bain for their very useful comments on an earlier draft, although the authors take full responsibility for the views stated herein. We also thank Jaimie Beven in the Faculty of Law, Murdoch University, for her help in providing information regarding sentencing.
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Table 1.

Descriptive Characteristics of the ATIA

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Table 2

Content analysis of special treatment statements

Generalised comment about special treatment with specifics given 31

(only including participants who made no specific comments)

Number of participants who made specific comments (one or more) 42 *

Specific Comments

1. Handouts (e.g., welfare, weddings, funerals, cars, paid to have dog) 21
2. Education (e.g., children get free books, get paid to go to school) 17
3. Legal system (e.g., more lenient sentencing, more rights in law; different laws) 14
4. Housing (e.g., subsidized to build a house, given housing, help with rent) 10

Total specific beliefs 62*

Multiple references

27 participants gave one specific reference
10 participants gave two specific references
5 participants gave three specific references

* 42 people noted 62 specific beliefs
Appendix 1
Identified beliefs about Indigenous Australians

1. Aborigines are more likely to drink alcohol than non-Aborigines.
2. Aboriginal people don’t want to work
3. Aboriginal affairs is awash with money
4. There is no accountability in Aboriginal Affairs.
5. Aboriginal people get special treatment (e.g., Being Aboriginal entitles you to more social security benefits)
6. Separation of Aboriginal services (specifically, specialised medical and legal service organisations) provide special privileges
7. Aboriginal people are involved in a land grab.
8. The Free Car/Bicycle:
   a. In some cases, it is said that Aboriginal families receive a car without the need for any contribution at all toward its cost.
   b. In other cases, it is said that Aboriginal people need only pay the first one or two payments under a hire purchase agreement and that "the government" will meet the remaining costs.
   c. In yet another variation, Aboriginal children are alleged to receive a free bicycle each -- usually described as "shiny" or "new" - at government expense.