Understanding the Pathways from Grievance to Violent Extremism: The Role of Ethnic Narcissism and Perceived Victimhood on Support for Violent Extremism in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Executive Summary

This report summarises research examining when grievances are associated with support for violent extremism in Aotearoa New Zealand. Specifically, we examine the role of ethnic narcissism (a fragile yet inflated sense of ethnic superiority) in shaping when perceived ethnic grievances influences support for violent extremism. Using a national sample of approximately 30,000 adults from the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS), we found that perceived grievances, or a sense that one's group is discriminated against in society, predicted greater support for violent extremism, but only when paired with high levels of ethnic narcissism among white NZ Europeans. By contrast, a secure, positive form of ethnic identification that is not defensive, nor entitled, does not have such detrimental implications. Moreover, the observed findings were specific to white NZ Europeans and not found among Māori, Pacific, and Asian participants. Although the observed effects were small, these results suggest that insecure, defensive attachments to white identity—rather than white ethnic identification itself—are related to support for violent extremism. These findings suggest that grievance narratives such as the "Great Replacement Theory" become particularly toxic when combined with ethnic narcissism, suggesting that policymakers should focus on addressing white grievance rhetoric and fostering healthier forms of group attachment. Promoting secure and positive ethnic identification among white New Zealanders may help provide a healthier alternative to prevent grievances from escalating into support for violent extremism, offering a path forward in countering violent extremism.

Introduction

Politically motivated violence from far-right extremists is an emerging challenge in many western nations, including Aotearoa New Zealand. The domestic danger was brought into sharp focus on March 15th 2019, when a far-right white nationalist opened fire at two Mosques in Christchurch, killing 51 people and injuring many others (Global Terrorism Index, GTI, 2020). In the shooter's manifesto*, he lays out grievances caused by Muslim immigrants against white Europeans in a sentiment echoed by other white nationalist violent extremists (Horgan, 2024). For the past two decades, the threat of "terrorism" has been mostly synonymous with Islamic extremists in the media (Kearns et al., 2019), public consciousness (Dolliver & Kearns, 2022), and empirical research (Ahmed & Lynch, 2024; Schuurman, 2019); however, attacks from white nationalist extremists have been on the rise in the west for more than a decade (Collins, 2021). Yet, most previous research has focused on the threat of Islamic extremists in the west, and it is less clear if these factors carry over to far-right extremism that has some distinctive characteristics. The current research examines the role of two factors that may be relevant to support for violent extremism: (a) perceived grievances and victimhood toward one's ethnic group; and (b) ethnic narcissism, an insecure and fragile sense of connection to one's ethnic group characterised by grandiose beliefs about the greatness of one's ethnic group. We examine whether these factors interact to predict support for violent extremism in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Distinctive features of far-right extremism

Far-right extremists have several qualities that each present a challenge to identifying them: 1) they are radicalized online, 2) they tend to act alone, and 3) they blend in with less extreme partisans. Because white supremacists are more likely to be radicalized through diffuse online networks rather than by specific organizations with an identifiable leader and

* "The Great Replacement" manifesto in first author's possession with approval of New Zealand's Chief Censor

members (Cai & Landon, 2019; Johnson et al., 2019), identifying one extremist does not lead in a straightforward way to identifying others. Added to this is the fact that they tend to act alone (Gill et al., 2014), making it hard to identify their group or ideology even after they have committed an attack. Perhaps the biggest challenge in addressing this issue is that far-right radicalization has a spectrum of support in the local population. The rise of legitimized far right populistic political movements has increased societal tolerance for extremist ideas in the US and Europe (Rosner, 2018). It can be difficult to tell what the difference is between voting for a political candidate friendly to far-right extremist views from being a far-right extremist.

Each of these three challenges in studying far-right extremism can be addressed by studying extremism at the population level rather than by targeting individuals in pre-defined extremist groups. This follows the model of a public health approach to extremism rather than one of criminality (Alcalá et al., 2017). Because of the diffuse nature of far-right ideology, it is unclear what percentage of the general public are sympathetic to these beliefs and where the line should be drawn to separate extremist from moderate political beliefs.

Perceived Grievances and Sense of Victimhood

One line of thinking shared by many perpetrators of far-right extremist violence is one of ethnic grievance (Collins, 2021). Many extremists see themselves as part of a larger group that faces discrimination, injustice, and unfair treatment by rival groups. “Great Replacement Theory”, cited by multiple white nationalist extremists, argues that the white race is in danger of being replaced by other ethnic or cultural groups, including Muslims, Jews, and other groups perceived as non-white and/or non-western (Am & Weimann, 2020). Theories such as this stoke fears of becoming marginalized in one’s own society and paint whites (a majority group in most western nations) as the victims of injustice. Religious and political extremism has been linked to perceived grievances, although the exact form these take can depend on

the specific extremist ideology to which the individual subscribes (van Prooijen & Kuijper, 2020).

From Grievances to Violent Extremism

While the perception that one's group is under threat is a predictor of reactionary violence across many domains, people vary on a continuum as to how susceptible they are to feeling threatened. Specifically, narcissism is a dispositional trait that makes individuals more sensitive to threats. The theory of threatened egoism argues that narcissists privately have a low estimation of themselves, and "mask" this by projecting a grandiose self-image (Baumeister et al., 2000; 1996). The result is over inflated self-esteem that is highly sensitive to criticism: those with a narcissistic inflated self-image are more likely to react negatively to criticism and lash out, sometimes violently, at the source of criticism (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Crucially, narcissists are hyper-vigilant to criticism and tend to perceive ego threats where none exist. For instance, narcissists are more likely to report being the victims of transgressions compared to non-narcissists, due in part to biased recall (McCullough et al., 2003). While the relationship between narcissism, perceived threats, and reactionary violence has been empirically established at the individual level, the same can also apply at the level of a group, such as an ethnic group.

Just as individuals can have a fragile and insecure attachment to their self-image, they can have the same kind of attachment to the image of their group identity. "Collective narcissism" is characterized by a strong emotional investment in an ingroup identity combined with an unrealistic grandiose belief about the group's greatness (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). Much like individual narcissism, individuals with collective narcissism privately hold beliefs of the low status of their ingroup but project an image of high status for that group. This high-status image is fragile and when it is perceived to be challenged, collective narcissists tend to endorse retaliation against the group that is the source of this challenge.

Collective narcissism can theoretically occur for any kind of ingroup identity including one's nationality, ethnicity, political party, religion, sports teams and any range of other groups. Parallel to how individual narcissists are sensitive to self-esteem threats, collective narcissists are sensitive to perceived threats to the ingroup. They are more likely see ambiguous situations as threatening to the ingroup and support hostile actions against other groups believed to threaten their identity (Golec de Zavala et al., 2016).

Collective narcissism has been linked with support for extremist violence as well as actual membership in extremist groups. For instance, in a sample from Lebanon, collective narcissism about a minority political or religious identity predicted support for collective violence against members of rival political parties and religions (Abou-Ismail et al., 2023). Similarly, violent separatists in Sri Lanka and Jihadist extremists across Morrocco and Indonesia were found to have higher levels of collective narcissism than their non-radical counterparts and this was closely linked to support for political violence (Jasko et al., 2020).

The negative outcomes for collective narcissism are not necessarily true for all forms of ingroup attachment. Collective narcissism has been characterized as an insecure or "defensive" form of ingroup attachment, or "fragile-ingroup love" (Golec De Zavala, 2011). This is distinguished from secure ingroup attachment which includes agreement with simple ingroup identification items (e.g., "being a member of my ethnic group is an important part of my self-image"). Compared to collective narcissism, this construct is a more positive sense of connection to one's ethnic community and does not include connotations of one's ethnic group being superior to others, and does not involve feeling one's group is entitled or competitive with other ethnic groups. Many studies and meta-analyses reveal that secure in-group love or positive feelings toward one's own group is unrelated to hostility toward others (Brewer, 1999; Brown, 2000; Hinkle & Brown, 1990; Jackson et al., 2001; Pehrson et al.,

2009). By contrast, insecure group attachment, or collective narcissism is related to greater hostility toward others (Golec de Zavala et al., 2016; Jasko et al., 2020).

Current Research

The present study examines the relationship between ethnic narcissism and perceived grievances (in the form of perceived ethnic discrimination) on support for violent extremism in Aotearoa New Zealand. Specifically, we expected that levels of ethnic narcissism act as a 'volume knob' turning up or down the relationship between perceived grievances and a sense that one's ethnic group is discriminated against or treated unfairly in society on support for violent extremism (see Figure 1). Only when people are high in ethnic narcissism, feelings that one's group is discriminated against and victimised in society will be related to higher levels of support for violent extremism.

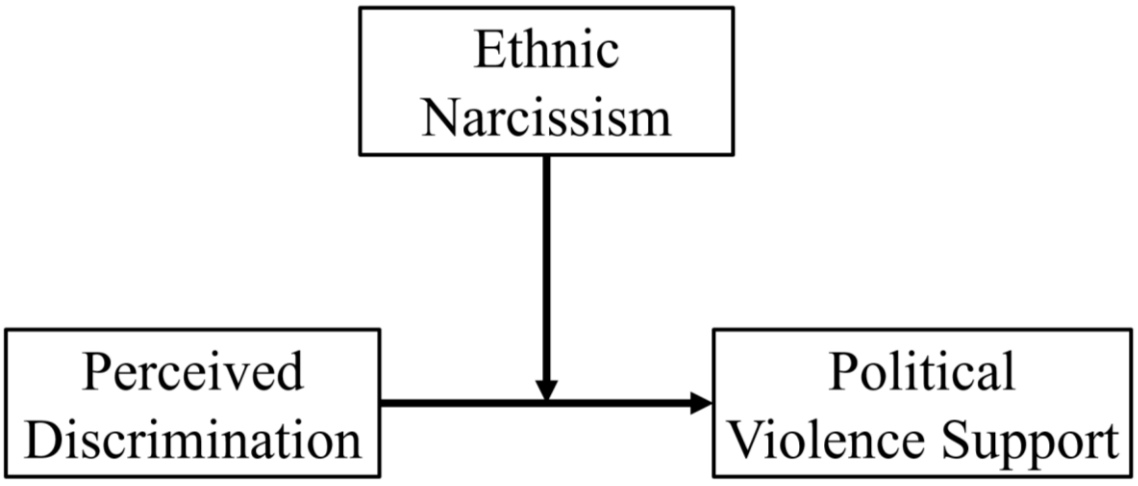


Figure 1. Conceptual diagram for the moderating effect ethnic narcissism has on relationship between perceived discrimination and victimhood on support for violent extremism.

We contrast this with the role of a more secure ingroup identification to establish whether any attachment to one's ethnic group is problematic or if it is unique to this insecure attachment in the form of ethnic narcissism. We additionally test this across the four largest ethnic groups (New Zealand Europeans, Māori, Asians, and Pacific Islanders) to establish if

this relationship is unique to white majority group members or if it is prevalent among all ethnic groups in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Method

Sampling Procedure

Data were drawn from Time 15 (2023-2024) of the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS). This wave was chosen because it is the only wave which included our main outcome variable, support for violent extremism (see Measures below). The NZAVS is a national longitudinal survey of over 70,000 adults New Zealanders running yearly since 2009. Participants were initially invited to participate by randomly selecting from the New Zealand Electoral Roll and include NZ citizens and permanent residents who are eligible to vote. Questionnaires were sent by post to participants, although participants were invited to complete an online version if they provided an email address (Sibley, 2023).

Participants

The Time 15 wave included 32,857 participants, including 26,699 (83.5%) identified as NZ European, 3,120 (9.8%) identified as Māori, 502 (1.6%) as Pasifika, and 1,663 (5.2%) as Asian. Participants ranged in age from 18-99 years (M = 52.78; SD = 16.77), with a larger percentage identified as female (63.4%). Education levels ranged from No Qualifications and Level 1 certification to Level 10 doctoral degrees, based on the NZ Qualifications Authority (NZQA) framework.

Measures

Support for Violent Extremism

This was assessed using a single statement: "*It is sometimes necessary to use violence to fight against political, ideological, or social agendas that are unjust*" adapted from

previous research (Nivette et al., 2022; also see Bilali, 2022) for which participants responded on a 1-7 scale where 1=Strongly Disagree and 7=Strongly Agree.

Ethnic narcissism

Ethnic narcissism is defined by a grandiose regard for one's ethnic group and a strong sense that that group is entitled to more relative to other ethnicities. This was assessed by an average of responses to 3 items taken from previous research (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). These items included: "*I insist upon my ethnic group getting the respect that is due to it*", "*The true worth of my ethnic group is often misunderstood*" and "*If my ethnic group had a major say in the world, the world would be a much better place.*"

Ethnic identification

Ethnic identification was assessed by averaging responses to 3 statements taken from previous research (Leach et al., 2008). These items included: "*I often think about the fact that I am a member of my ethnic group*", "*Being a member of my ethnic group is an important part of how I see myself*" and "*The fact that I am a member of my ethnic group is an important part of my identity.*"

Perceived grievances

Perceived grievances were assessed using a measure of perceived discrimination capturing the extent to which one believes their ethnic group is the victim of discrimination in society. This was measured using the statement "*People from my ethnic group are discriminated against in New Zealand*", taken from previous research (Osborne & Sibley, 2013).

Ethnicity

Ethnicity was measured by asking participants to self-identify their own ethnicity. These responses were classified into one of four options: NZ European, Māori, Pacific Nations, and Asian.

Control Variables

We included several demographic factors as control variables in our analyses to ensure any observed effects were found over and above any differences in age, gender, religiosity, employment status, relationship status, parental status, level of education (using the NZQA framework), and regional deprivation (using NZ Deprivation Index).

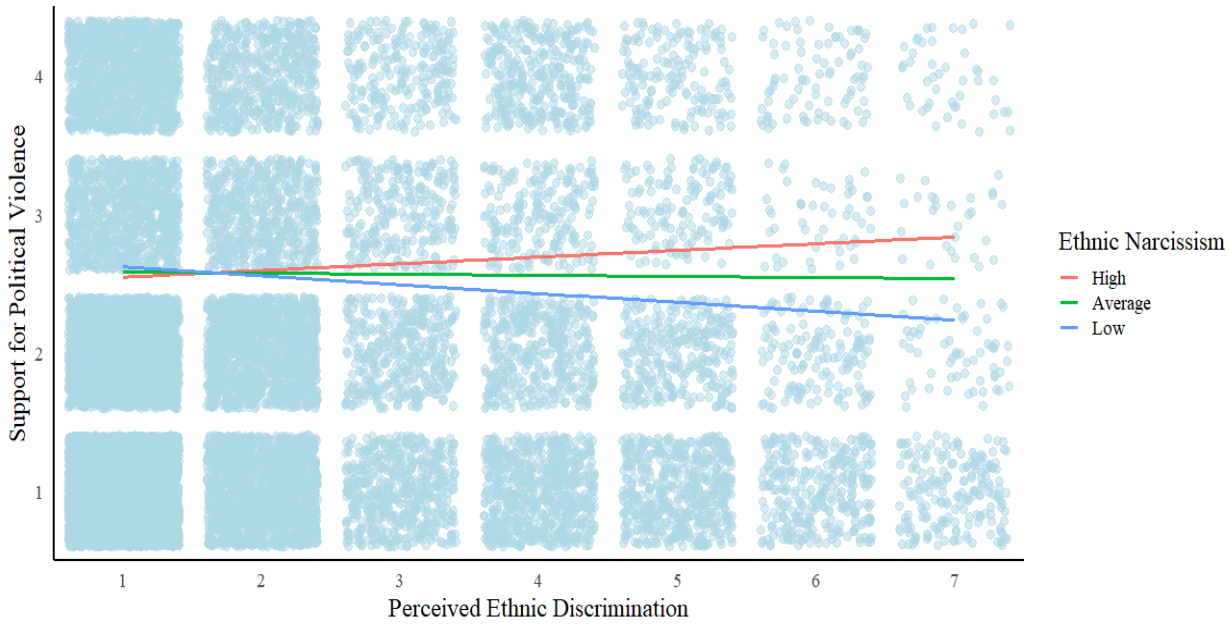
Results

Descriptive findings on the level of perceived discrimination, ethnic narcissism, ethnic identification, and support for violent extremism are included in the Appendix section at the end of the report.

Moderating role of ethnic narcissism on support for violent extremism

As the main purpose of this research was to examine whether an individuals' sense of ethnic narcissism would turn up the volume knob such that grievances (or a sense of ethnic discrimination) would be associated with support for violent extremism, we conducted a series of moderation analyses using Hayes' (2017) PROCESS macro (Model 1) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples. We first examined this effect among white NZ Europeans and found that ethnic narcissism moderates the relationship between perceived discrimination and support for political violence, $B = .209$, $SE = .005$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.019, .040]. Decomposing the interaction revealed that perceived discrimination predicted *higher* levels of support for political violence only among people who were high in ethnic narcissism (i.e., +1 *SD* above the mean), $b = .046$, $SE = .010$, $p < .001$, but not among those with moderate levels of ethnic narcissism, $b = -.003$, $SE = .010$, $p = .769$. Among those with low levels of ethnic narcissism (-1 *SD* below the mean), the model predicted *lesser* support for political violence, $b = -.042$, $SE = .014$, $p = .003$. In other words, only among those high in both perceived discrimination *and* ethnic narcissism do we find significant support for violent extremism (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Scatterplot showing the relationship between perceived ethnic discrimination, ethnic narcissism, and support for political violence for New Zealand Europeans.



We then proceeded to test if this relationship was unique to white NZ Europeans or if this relationship between perceived discrimination with ethnic narcissism on support for violent extremism was evident among other ethnic groups. Our moderation analyses revealed that this interactive effect of ethnic narcissism and perceived grievances on support for violent extremism was indeed unique to white NZ Europeans, and not found among Māori, Pacific, or Asian New Zealanders (see Table 1).

Table 1. Interaction effects of perceived discrimination and political violence, moderated by ethnic narcissism, split by ethnicity.

Ethnicity	Coefficient	SE	p	LLCI	ULCI
NZ European	.03	0.01	>.001	.02	0.04
Māori	-.01	0.01	0.851	-.02	0.02
Pacific Nations	.03	0.03	0.411	-0.38	0.09
Asian	-.02	0.02	0.285	-.06	.02

Moderating role of ethnic identification

We then proceeded to test whether a secure form of ethnic identification would similarly serve as a volume knob that converted perceived grievances to support for violent extremism. However, our analyses revealed that there was no significant moderating effect of ethnic identification on the relationship between perceived discrimination and support for violent extremism (all *bs* < .03 and > -.03, all *p*s > .05). This was the case for all ethnic groups suggesting that a secure ethnic identification does not exacerbate or 'turn up the volume' on support for violent extremism even when people feel their group is unfairly discriminated against or possess grievances about how their ethnic group is treated in society.

Summary and Policy Implications

Summary

The current research uses a large national sample of adults from Aotearoa New Zealand to examine if perceived grievances toward one's ethnic group predict support for violent extremism depending on levels of ethnic narcissism. Our data revealed that specifically among white NZ Europeans, perceived grievances, in the form of beliefs about unfair discrimination toward one's ethnic group, predicted support for violent extremism, but only among people who are high in ethnic narcissism. This is in line with research showing that people with narcissism lash out violently when under threat as they are more sensitive to ego threats. In the same way, a narcissistic relationship with one's ethnic group may also make an individual highly sensitive to provocation in the form of ingroup threats of discrimination and be more likely to lash out with political violence.

While this link between grievances and violent extremism through ethnic narcissism is found among the white NZ Europeans majority group, it does not emerge among minority groups in our study. Another key finding is that while ethnic narcissism acts as a volume

knob that converts grievances to support for violent extremism, a healthier *secure* form of attachment to one's ethnic identity is not related to support for violent extremism (Table 3). It is only *insecure* forms of ethnic attachment characterized by entitlement and the perception that one's group is under attack that predict support for violent extremism. With that said, it is important to note that the observed effects are quite small meaning that these factors play a small but significant contributing role in predicting support for violent extremism. Future work is needed to unravel other factors also at play in contributing to support for violent extremism.

Table 3. Summary of findings for ethnic attachment and violent extremism

Type of Ethnic attachment	Effect on violent extremism	Illustrative statements
Insecure ethnic attachment	Linked to higher violent extremism	*If my ethnic group had more say in the world, the world would be a better place* *The true worth of my ethnic group is often misunderstood.*
Secure ethnic attachment	Not linked to higher violent extremism	*The fact that I am a member of my ethnic group is an important part of my identity.* *I often think about the fact that I am a member of my ethnic group.*

Policy Implications

The current findings suggest that policy-makers would benefit from focusing attention on perceived grievances or the belief that white NZ Europeans are discriminated against in society. While the 'great replacement theory' is well known as a prominent narrative used by white nationalist groups to mobilise support for the violent extremism, our research suggests that this is especially problematic for people who have an insecure group attachment in the form of ethnic narcissism with fragile but grandiose views about the greatness of their group. However, our data also suggests that a secure form of ethnic attachment and identification is benign and policy-makers would benefit from trying to promote a secure connection with

one's ethnic heritage among white NZ Europeans. Extant psychological research reveals that people's identities are an important part of their self-concept (for reviews, see Hogg, 2016; Hornsey, 2008), and identification with these social groups can be good for health and well-being (for a review, see Jetten et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important that white NZ Europeans feel a sense of healthy and positive identification with their ethnic identity in order to prevent this from metastasizing into a form of ethnic narcissism that is poisonous. Focusing on ways to promote a more secure and healthy form of ethnic identification may reduce the risk of grievances transforming into support for violent extremism.

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Appendix

Generally, there is low support for violent extremism within the population. In our sample of 29,759 New Zealanders, 35% chose "strongly disagree," the lowest possible endorsement (Figure 2) and 68% rated below the midpoint of 4.

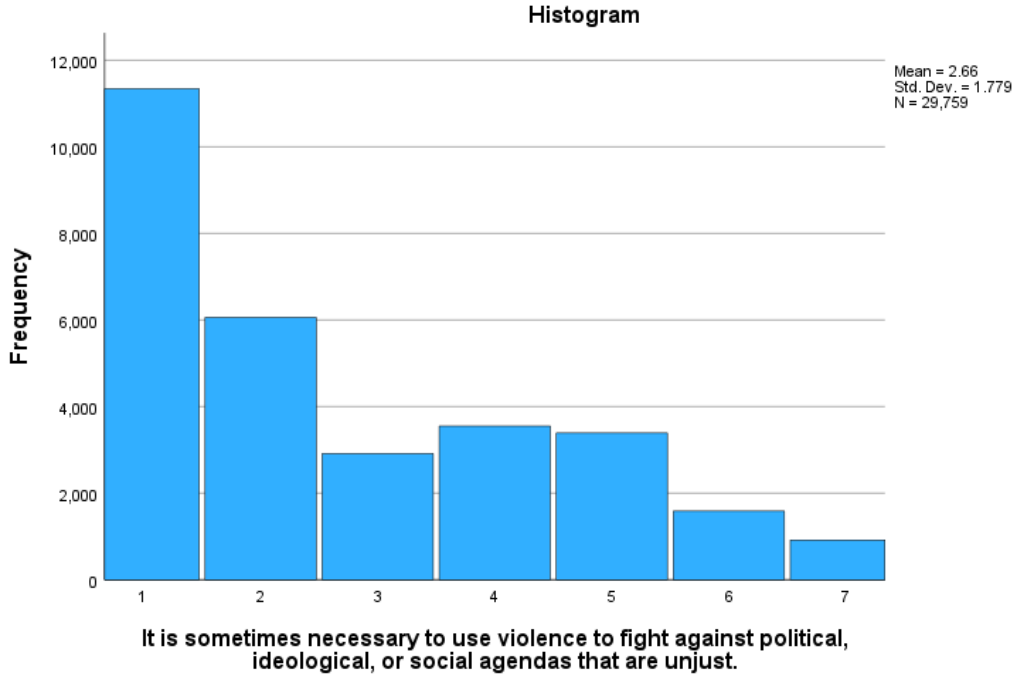

Figure A1. Histogram of responses to the statement assessing support for political violence, with 1 indicating "Strongly Disagree" and 7 indicating "Strongly Agree."

Ethnic Narcissism

Similarly, levels of ethnic narcissism (the insecure form of attachment to one's ethnic group) within the population are generally low, with averages for each ethnic group at or below the midpoint of 4 (Table A1).

Table A1. Mean ratings of ethnic narcissism split by ethnicity.

Ethnicity	Mean (Standard deviation)
NZ European	3.42 (1.52)
Māori	2.52 (1.25)
Pacific Nations	4.30 (1.59)
Asian	4.12 (1.47)

Ethnic Identification

Ethnic identification (the secure form of ethnic attachment) is slightly more common in our sample. This is especially the case among all minority groups compared to NZ Europeans (Table A2).

Table A2. Mean ratings of ethnic identification split by ethnicity.

Ethnicity	Mean (Standard deviation)
NZ European	3.12 (1.54)
Māori	4.62 (1.79)
Pacific Nations	4.77 (1.72)
Asian	4.68 (1.59)

Perceived Discrimination

Minority groups in our sample were more likely to perceive their ethnic group as being the target of discrimination in New Zealand (Table A3).

Table A3. Mean ratings of perceived discrimination split by ethnicity.

Ethnicity	Mean (Standard deviation)
NZ European	2.11 (1.57)
Māori	4.47 (1.99)
Pacific Nations	4.20 (1.86)
Asian	3.83 (1.75)