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## Ethnic identity and paranoid thinking: Implicit out-group preference and language dominance predict paranoia in Emirati women

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## ABSTRACT

**Background and objectives:** Psychotic experiences including persecutory beliefs are elevated among immigrant and minority populations, especially when living in low ethnic density neighbourhoods (the ethnic density effect). Discrimination, victimization and experiencing a sense of 'not belonging' are hypothesized to play a role in this effect. Because a secure ethnic identity protects against poor self-esteem it may also protect against paranoia. This study explores the relationship between language proficiency (Arabic/English), in-group identity (implicit and explicit) and paranoia in female Emirati university students.

**Methods:** Female citizens of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Emirati college women ( $N = 208$ ), reported English/Arabic language proficiencies, and performed a computerized affective priming task engineered to implicitly assess in-group (Emirati) versus out-group (American) positivity. Participants also completed self-report measures of in-group identity (MIIS), and paranoia (PaDs).

**Results:** Arabic proficiency was negatively correlated with paranoia, as was implicit in-group positivity. Furthermore, participants reporting English language dominance, and those demonstrating an implicit out-group preference, reported the highest levels of paranoia.

**Limitations:** The study is limited by its use of an all female sample.

**Conclusions:** Implicit in-group attitudes and linguistic competence protect against paranoia and may help to explain the ethnic density effect.

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Recent research has shown that psychotic experiences such as paranoia, lie along a continuum with healthy functioning and are widely distributed in the general population. [Bebbington et al. \(2013\)](#) explored persecutory ideation (paranoia) in a general population sample in the UK ( $N = 8580$ ), and concluded that paranoia in nonclinical populations appeared to be quantitatively, rather than qualitatively different from that observed in patients experiencing paranoia in the context of psychosis. [Melo, Corcoran, Shryane, and Bentall \(2008\)](#) explored persecutory ideation amongst clinical (diagnoses: schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder or delusional disorder) and nonclinical participants (university students) in a questionnaire based study. Correlations between persecutory ideation scores and clinical measures of paranoia and depression were the same for both groups.

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### 1. Ethnicity, identity, culture and paranoia

This idea of a continuum suggests that investigating psychosis-like experiences in non-clinical populations may prove a fruitful approach to identifying modifiable risk and resilience factors associated with the "psychosis phenotype" ([Johns & van Os, 2001](#)). Numerous studies with clinical and non-clinical participants exploring possible vulnerabilities to psychosis (psychosis-proneness), repeatedly point to social determinants such as attachment relationships, socio-economic status and race/ethnicity. Paranoia, in particular, has been linked to factors such as disrupted early attachment experiences ([Bentall, Wickham, Shevlin, & Varese, 2012](#)) and social disadvantage and victimization experiences ([Iacovino, Jackson, & Oltmanns, 2014](#); [Wickham, Taylor, Shevlin, & Bentall, 2014](#)). For example, Asian immigrants to Britain and Surinamese immigrants to the Netherlands appear to experience elevated rates of psychosis, paranoia included ([Kirkbride et al., 2006](#); [Selten et al., 2001](#)). Similarly, several studies have shown

that people belonging to ethnic minorities have elevated rates of psychosis when living in areas with a high ethnic majority population, but not when living in predominantly minority neighbourhoods. This is a phenomenon known as the ethnic density effect (Bosqui, Hoy, & Shannon, 2014; Boydell et al., 2001; Das-Munshi et al., 2012; Veling et al., 2008).

One interpretation of these findings is that immigrants and members of minority communities are more likely to experience discrimination, victimization and a sense of 'not belonging'; all of which may confer an increased vulnerability to psychosis (Bentall, 2009). The sense of belonging, in turn, can be understood from a social psychological perspective in terms of social identity. Human beings seem to have a powerful need to identify themselves with particular social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). There is evidence that forming and holding a social identity protects individuals from low self-esteem (Crabtree, Haslam, Postmes, & Haslam, 2010; J; Jetten et al., 2014), which is known to be an important psychological process in paranoia (Bentall, 2003). Studies of migrant communities suggest that psychological distress results from the failure to achieve integration between identification with the host culture and identification with the culture of origin (Sam & Berry, 2010). Hence, having a weak sense of identity with the culture one lives in has been hypothesized to be a risk factor for paranoid symptoms (McIntyre, Elahi, & Bentall, In Subm).

Beyond ethnicity, migrant status and identity, a study exploring the links between cultural values, personality and psychopathology found that Turkish students holding relatively individualistic values (idiocentrics), but living in a relatively collectivist society (Istanbul), reported higher levels of psychopathology (especially paranoia) than their more collectivist orientated (allocentric) compatriots (Caldwell-Harris & Aycicegi, 2006). Conversely, and within the same study, US students holding relatively collectivist values, but living in an individualist society (Boston), reported relatively higher levels of psychopathology, including paranoia. These findings are explained by the concept of the 'person-environment fit', which suggests that having a personality congruent with the values of the overarching culture will increase wellbeing, while a mismatch is likely to have a detrimental effect (Triandis, 2000). Clashes with, or divergences from majority in-group values may also increase the likelihood of victimization experiences, perhaps leading to higher levels of persecutory ideation.

## 2. Communicative competence and paranoia

It has been suggested that a difficulty in understanding the intentions of others (Frith, 1992), and particularly the ability to attribute cognitive and affective states to others on the basis of verbal and non-verbal information (Scherzer, Leveillé, Achim, Boisseau, & Stip, 2012) is likely to increase the risk of paranoid interpretations of the actions of others. Consistent with this hypothesis, a large number of studies have reported that theory of mind (ToM) deficits are associated with psychosis (Bora, Yucei, & Pantelis, 2009). These problems are likely to be exacerbated when normal channels of communication between individuals become disrupted or impaired, or when there is ambiguity in these communications because of cultural or language differences. Consistent with this hypothesis, Kraepelin (1915) first observed an association between hearing loss and paranoia, which has subsequently been widely supported. For example, Thewissen et al. (2005) found that self-reported hearing impairment was prospectively associated with an elevated risk of psychosis-like experiences among a sample of participants from the general population ( $N = 7076$ ). Similarly, a study that experimentally manipulated hearing impairment by the use of hypnotic suggestion, also found support for the hearing impairment – paranoia hypothesis

(Zimbardo, Andersen, & Kabat, 1981). An extension to this account is that being unable hear is related to comprehension difficulties, and therefore the inability to accurately comprehend the speech of others may render one vulnerable to actual victimization experiences, or perhaps leads to feelings of victimization even in the absence of any malicious intent. In this extended model it is the inability to accurately comprehend what is being said that is the critical factor. If this hypothesis is correct, a lack of linguistic proficiency in the dominant language of ones' community would have the same effect. The present study explores these ideas among a nonclinical sample of bilingual college women from the United Arab Emirates.

## 3. The United Arab Emirates (UAE)

Fuelled by the revenues from oil and gas, the rapid social and economic changes experienced by the UAE in recent decades (WHO, 2006) have resulted in western acculturation and a diminishing proficiency in Arabic language ability among a minority of younger Emiratis (al-Khazi, 2008; Al-Nasr, 2011; Bristol-Rhys, 2010; Fox, Mourtada-Sabbah, & Al-Mutawa, 2006). One of the factors proposed as having led to acculturation and Arabic language deterioration in the UAE, is the influx of expatriates. Emiratis – as the citizens of the UAE are known – are now a minority population. According to the UAE's National Bureau of Statistics (2009) Emiratis make up only 11.38% of the population. Another widely proposed acculturative factor is education (Davidson, 2008). It is increasingly common for the UAE's educational institutions to follow Western educational curricula, teach in English, and employ Western expatriate teachers. Similarly there is a relatively widespread use of non-Arabic speaking nannies. Other acculturative factors – enabled by relatively high per capita GDP – include regular and extended overseas travel and widespread access to all forms of media and information technology (Mourtada-Sabbah, Al-Mutawa, Fox, & Walters, 2008). These and other factors are viewed as contributing to deterioration in Arabic language proficiency and an increase in Western acculturation among young Emirati adults (Alsharekh & Sprinborg, 2008; Mourtada-Sabbah et al., 2008; Thomas, 2015).

As already noted, a decreased ability to comprehend (hear) the dominant language of one's cultural group, and holding values that diverge from the in-group majority, have previously been associated with paranoia (Caldwell-Harris & Aycicegi, 2006; Thewissen et al., 2005). In this study, self-reported Arabic language competence and in-group (Emirati) identity/positivity are explored as predictors of persecutory ideation among Emirati females. Specifically, we hypothesized that relatively low Arabic language proficiency, and relatively low levels of implicit and explicit in-group positivity would be associated with elevated levels of persecutory ideation.

When assessing in-group evaluations (how positive or negative one feels about one's in-group), previous research suggests that it is particularly important to include implicit assessments. Studies exploring social-cognition have previously reported discrepancies between explicit and implicit in-group/out-group evaluations. Much of this research has focused on implicit racial bias, where implicit and explicit evaluations of African Americans (the out-group) are frequently discrepant among Whites (the in-group) (For review see Amodio & Mendoza, 2010). In such implicit assessment studies, occasionally in-groups are evaluated less favorably than out-groups (out-group preference). African Americans, for example, have frequently been found to demonstrate a White out-group preference when assessed implicitly. Similarly, many participants in these studies also show a discrepancy between explicit in-group (positive) and implicit in-group (negative) evaluations (Ashburn-Nardo, Knowles, & Monteith, 2003;

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