

Belief in social Darwinism linked to dysfunctional psychological characteristics

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A new survey study links belief in the concept of social Darwinism with certain dysfunctional psychological characteristics, such as exploitative attitudes towards others, hostility, and low self-esteem. Piotr Radkiewicz

of the Polish Academy of Sciences and Krystyna Skarzynska of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw, Poland, present these findings in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* on August 11, 2021.

Those who subscribe to social Darwinism view the social world as a sort of competitive jungle requiring ruthless competition for [limited resources](#), in which only the "strongest" survive. Social Darwinism includes a negative view of human nature, holding that people are inherently selfish and that cynical manipulation is an acceptable route to get ahead.

To better understand the personal characteristics underlying belief in social Darwinism, Radkiewicz and Skarzynska conducted a four-part survey study, with each part including 624 to 853 Polish participants. Specifically, they examined links between people's belief in social Darwinism and their characteristics regarding attachment styles, the "Big Five" [personality traits](#), the "Dark Triad" of personality, basic human values, and moral judgments.

Analysis of the survey results revealed links between belief in social Darwinism and dysfunctional [personal characteristics](#)—as opposed to more positive "individual resources." For instance, social Darwinists were more likely to display admiration for power, a desire to dominate, a desire to pursue their goals at all costs, and hostility. They were also more likely to have [low self-esteem](#), low self-sufficiency, and a fearful attachment style in their [close relationships](#).

The results are in line with the idea that social Darwinists hold beliefs that conflict with the principles of liberal democracy, and their vision of social life is not conducive to fostering a cooperative, egalitarian society. The authors also note an underlying "mental split," in that social Darwinists tend to worship strength and power while also having a

fragile self-image.

Future research could continue to explore the dispositional characteristics that underlie social Darwinism, as well as a broader collection of pessimistic views of the social world.

The authors add: "The belief that the social world resembles the Darwinian jungle is conflicting with the ideals of democracy that postulate maximizing citizens' wellbeing, minimizing violence, and promoting human rights. However, it can support adversarial democracy that aims to gain an advantage over the opponents and deprive them of power, good reputation, and economic strength."

More information: Radkiewicz P, Skarżyńska K (2021) Who are the "social Darwinists"? On dispositional determinants of perceiving the social world as competitive jungle. *PLoS ONE* 16(8): e0254434. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0254434

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