



RECOGNIZING RACE: CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Within the last decade, discussions of race and confrontations of racial hierarchies have come to the forefront of politics, media, and everyday life. With the rise of movements like *Black Lives Matter* and *Stop Asian Hate*, histories of injustice are highlighted, and a future of racial equity is demanded. While the past cannot be undone, identifying, and describing racist attitudes is a major step in dismantling racism at all levels, whether it be individual or institutional. Children are the future of these systems. Exploring when children conceptualize race may aid in understanding how racism perpetuates through generations.

What is race? From a sociological standpoint, “race is a human classification system that is socially constructed to distinguish between groups of people who share phenotypical characteristics.” 1(para. 1) Most often, dominant groups shape the categories of race to maintain systems of power, ultimately resulting in inequity of opportunity(1). In this case, differentiation is framed in a negative light, but differentiation is also a crucial part of child development. As children age, they begin to notice differences between objects, places, and people.

Throughout the process of categorizing groups of people, when can children conceptualize race? Many of the available psychological studies are contradictory and outdated. A major limitation of conducting scientific studies is measuring when children make racial category judgements beyond recognizing skin colour and distinct facial features. Roberts et al. attempted to explore this topic by comparing race as a stable variable to the nonstable variable of emotional expression (2). Presenting a series of pictures, interviewers asked: “When this child grows up, which grown-up will it be?” to limit the reliance on verbalized reasoning 2(p.889). The study found that consistent with previous research, children between 7-10 years old often reasoned that race is a constant, permanent characteristic (2). The authors

interpreted these results by hypothesizing; “when an identity is understood as stable, it may be viewed as more central and may therefore powerfully predict children’s expectations about individual properties” 2(p.888).

Roberts et al. identified another pattern: a child a part of a racial minority is more likely to conclude that race is a stable characteristic, in comparison to a white child (2). One possible explanation for this variance is colour-blind socialization. Colour-blind socialization is an ideology that considers the acknowledgement of race to be inappropriate and that racism can be eliminated by ignoring race altogether (3). Promoting colour blindness was shown to be common practice to combat racism according to numerous studies (4-6). Pahlke et al. examined videos of White-American mothers reading race-themed books to their 4-5-year-old children and completed surveys on the children’s racial attitudes and behaviours (4). Considering the focus on White-American mothers of middle to upper-middle class, the findings cannot be generalized to other groups. Results indicate that nearly all of the mothers adopted the colour-blind approach, predominantly out of fear of desensitizing their children to racial differences and promoting prejudice (4). However, according to the survey, this approach failed to prevent racial biases displayed by their children.4 Rather, mothers having a diverse social circle emerged as a prominent preventative measure (4).

Given the complexity of child development, it may not be possible to pinpoint exactly when children begin to ‘recognize race.’ The prominent trend is children begin to make race-based category judgements well before adults are willing to talk about it. On the surface, the overarching goal of colour-blind socialization is positive: seeing everyone as equal regardless of what one looks like. However, what was thought of as blindness to race has morphed into blindness to racism. Not seeing colour can diminish the diverse experiences racialized groups face and ultimately contribute to the persistence of racial inequalities by minimizing current diversity and inclusion efforts like *Black Lives Matter* and *Stop Asian*

Hate. Instead, prioritizing the recognition of colour, especially with youth, could serve to counteract stereotypes and set an example. In the words of Black author and activist Jemar Tisby, “The worst conversation adults can have with kids about race is no conversation at all” 5(para.1).

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