NEWS | POSTED JANUARY 23, 2018

Young Children View People's Behavior, Psychological Characteristics As Shaped by Their Environments Rather Than Race

PRESS RELEASE / CHILD DEVELOPMENT: Embargoed for Release on January 23, 2018

PRESS RELEASE

Published

Tuesday, January 23, 2018 12:01am

The Nature and Consequences of Essentialist Beliefs About Race in Early Childhood

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A new study has found that 5- to 6-year-olds view people's environments, not their skin color, as the most important determinant of their behavior and psychological characteristics. These findings contradict the idea that views of race that are known to lead to prejudice—such as believing that race naturally divides the world into distinct kinds of people—inevitably develop early in childhood. The study also found that the extent to which children endorsed such beliefs varied by the environments in which they were raised, especially exposure to people of different racial-ethnic backgrounds in their neighborhoods.

The study, by researchers at New York University (NYU) and the University of Amsterdam, is published in the journal *Child Development*.

"Our findings suggest that beliefs about race develop over time and in response to particular environments," explains Tara M. Mandalaywala, a postdoctoral fellow at NYU who led the study. "And that these beliefs vary for children of different backgrounds."

Researchers looked at 203 Black and White 5- and 6-year-olds living in New York City and 430 Black and White adults from across the United States. They asked respondents about whether they saw skin color as something that could be inherited, and whether they believed that race determines what people will grow up to be like (e.g., how smart, nice, or athletic they will be). Previous research has not assessed young children's beliefs about the extent to which race determines a person's behavioral and psychological characteristics. The study also measured the demographic composition of children's neighborhoods.

The researchers found that children viewed skin color as something that could be inherited, but did not endorse the types of beliefs that contribute to stereotyping and prejudice in adults: They expected that a person's behavioral and psychological properties would be determined by the environment in which he or she was raised, not by inherited race.

Children's beliefs about race depended on their exposure to diversity. In particular, children who lived in racially homogeneous neighborhoods held stronger beliefs that race determined behavior than children in more diverse neighborhoods, suggesting that such beliefs are shaped by the environment.

"Our research suggests that beliefs about race that contribute to prejudice take a long time to develop—when they do—and that their development depends to some extent on the neighborhoods in which children grow up," says Marjorie Rhodes, professor of psychology at NYU, who coauthored the study. "An important question our study raises is whether such attitudes in children are responsive to exposure to diversity in child care and school settings as well as to diversity in neighborhood environments."

The National Institutes of Health funded the study.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, The Nature and Consequences of Essentialist Beliefs About Race in Early Childhood by Mandalaywala, TM (New York University), Ranger-Murdock, G (New York University), Amodio, DM (New York University and University of Amsterdam), and Rhodes, M (New York University).
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