



Society for Research in Child Development

Office for Policy and Communications

750 First St., NE • Washington, DC 20002-4242

OFFICE: (202) 336-5926 • FAX: (202) 336-6184

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Contact Information:

Andrea Browning

Society for Research in Child Development

Office for Policy and Communications

(202) 336-5926

abrowning@srcd.org

Children's Ideas about Fairness May Depend on Race

One of the first studies ever to examine the development of “modern racism” in children finds that by fourth grade, children are making decisions about fairness that take race into account. This finding, from researchers at Lafayette College in Easton, Pa., is published in the July/August issue of the journal *Child Development*.

Research shows that many adults make decisions about hiring, healthcare benefits, etc. that are biased against African Americans even while believing that all people should be treated equally, notes lead author Ann V. McGillicuddy-DeLisi, Ph.D., the Marshall R. Metzgar Professor of Psychology. “Nevertheless, under some circumstances adults discriminate even when there is no racially based reason for their behavior.” This behavior is not traditional hostile racism, she says, but reveals a subtle racial bias known as “modern racism.”

To identify whether this bias affects children's reasoning about fairness and, if so, when it appears, the researchers evaluated 87 white children, 52 second graders and 35 fourth graders. They chose these age groups because second graders are at an age when racism and other negative attitudes that increase through preschool years have begun to diminish, while by fourth grade, children tend to develop group identification that shows strong ethnic/racial preferences even as they say they're not racially prejudiced.

The researchers told two stories about three characters who produced artwork. One produced more artwork than the other two, i.e., was more productive. One was poor, i.e., needy, while the third was the oldest, i.e., age-entitled. The characters' teacher sold their artwork at a fair, resulting in an unexpected reward. The teacher gave the money to the characters and told them to divide the money among themselves in the fairest way.

With the stories, about one-third of the children saw pictures in which the oldest character was black, one-third saw pictures with a productive black character and one-third saw pictures with a needy black character. In each case, the other two characters were white. The children were asked to allot the money to each of the story characters in the fairest way and explain why their choice was fair. Finally, children rated the fairness of different patterns of distributing the money based on four different principles of justice (age entitlement, equality, equity and benevolence).

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Second graders' responses were based on equality principles and didn't vary with the character's race. Fourth graders' responses, however, showed children considered the characters' race. For example, they gave a greater share of the money to white needy characters than black needy characters, while black productive characters received greater shares than white productive characters.

The findings suggest that 9- and 10-year-old white children take race into account as they decide what is just and fair.

“There are several implications to this finding,” said Dr. McGillicuddy-DeLisi. Among them:

- Everyday interpretations of events are likely to be influenced by race in subtle ways that children, parents, teachers and practitioners who work with children don't recognize.
- Minority children who see outcomes that disadvantage or advantage them compared to white children may attribute the motives of others' behaviors and the possibility of success to espoused strategies such as hard work and productivity.
- White children and adults, perhaps unaware of their biases, may believe in equality principles while behaving in unacknowledged racist ways.

The implications of this work suggest that “a focus on the developmental progression of modern racism may hold the best possibility of addressing its effects,” notes Dr. McGillicuddy-DeLisi. “There has been little research that focuses on effective prevention of modern racism. This study suggests there may be a developmental window of opportunity for intervention in the early years of elementary school, a time when children's moral reasoning is strongly tied to principles of equality. By the time children are 9- to 10-years-old, however, this window of opportunity appears closed.”

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 77, Issue 4, *Children's distributive justice judgments: Aversive racism in Euro-American children?* By McGillicuddy-De Lisi AV, Daly M and Neal A (Lafayette College). Copyright 2006 The Society for Research in Child development, Inc. All rights reserved.