



Young Children's Preferences: Gender, Race, and Social Status

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ABSTRACT—*In this article, I consider how two aspects of society—social categories (in particular, gender and race) and social status—guide young children's preferences. Research on children's social categories reveals that gender-based social preferences emerge earlier than race-based preferences. Recent studies also show that children are attuned to social status, and the association of race with status differences could explain why race influences children's social preferences. I conclude with questions and suggestions for research.*

KEYWORDS—*children; social categories; attitudes; race; gender; social status*

In some cases, it is not hard to explain why people, including children, like some individuals more than others. For example, it seems natural and rational to like those who have been nice to you in the past more than those who have been unkind. Yet humans commonly prefer some people they have never met and dislike others, based solely on demographic information (e.g., gender, race). What are the developmental origins of this tendency?

In this article, I consider how two prominent features of society guide children's preferences for others. I begin by reviewing research on the development of *social categories*, focusing on children's gender- and race-based preferences for other people.

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Next, I turn to recent research on *social status*, particularly the role information about social class plays in guiding children's attitudes toward individuals and groups. Finally, because the study of children's *naïve sociology* (1) is still in its infancy, I conclude by highlighting questions and suggesting avenues for research.

SOCIAL CATEGORIES: GENDER VERSUS RACE

Humans recognize and care about many social categories, but most research on intergroup bias has focused on two: gender and race (2). These distinctions are encoded automatically by adults (3; see also 4, 5), and have consequences for how we view, interact with, and treat one another (6). Gender and race share another feature: Typically, they are visually marked. Indeed, a social category's perceptual availability can contribute to its psychological prominence (7) and significance in social interactions (2).

Children perceive gender and race in the 1st year of life. In looking-time studies, infants can categorize faces by gender and race (see Ref. 8, for a review). For example, 9-month-olds who viewed a series of White faces during a familiarization phase looked longer during a test phase at Asian faces than at (new) White faces (9). Not only do infants detect gender and race information in faces, but they are also sensitive to the distribution of different kinds of faces in their environment. When 3-month-olds were shown an unfamiliar female face alongside an unfamiliar male face, those whose primary caregivers were female gazed longer at the female faces, whereas those whose primary caregivers were male looked longer at the males (10). Similarly, when 3-month-old Black infants living in Ethiopia were shown an unfamiliar Black face alongside an unfamiliar White face, they looked longer at the Black faces, whereas 3-month-old White infants living in Israel who saw the same face pairs looked longer at the White faces (11).

Although these looking-time studies suggest that infants detect visual markers of gender and race, they do not tell us whether infants prefer people based on either category. Infants

may look longer at faces that are most similar to other faces in their environment not because they prefer them socially, but rather because such faces are easier for them to process (12, 13; see Ref. 14, for a review of infants' face processing). Moreover, in research using more direct measures of social preference, infants have not chosen based on race: In one study in which White 10-month-olds were offered toys by a White woman and a Black woman standing side by side, infants were equally likely to accept each woman's toy (13). Even in some studies of preschoolers, the youngest children have not favored members of racial in-groups (Refs 15: no bias until age 5; 16: no bias until age 4; 17: no bias at age 3).

Studies that directly compare children's use of gender and race in their social decisions tell us more about young children's treatment of information about race and illuminate the relative importance of each dimension in early development. In one set of studies (17, 18), researchers tested White 3-year-olds' reliance on gender and race in choosing social partners and informants. When presented with photographs of two unfamiliar people who differed only in gender, White boys befriended and learned from pictures of other boys, but White girls befriended and learned from pictures of other girls. In contrast, when presented with two people who differed only in race, the same participants were equally likely to select Black and White children as friends and informants. Thus, measures of children's social trust and preferences suggest that young children focus on other people's gender, not their race (see also Ref. 5).

Research on young children's consideration of gender and race points to two conclusions about children's early social thinking: First, race carries much social meaning for adults, but not for young children. Second, there is little support for the proposal that children build social categories and develop intergroup biases simply by looking out at the world, focusing on dimensions they can perceive, and preferring people who are similar to them (19; see Ref. 20, for a similar point). Infants as young as 3 months perceive gender and race categories, yet very young children seem to care about the former, not the latter.

However, in numerous studies, at least by age 4 or 5, White children prefer members of their racial in-group over members of racial out-group (15, 16, 19, 21–23). That White children's use of race to guide their social preferences changes with age raises a question: What leads children who do not initially attach meaning to race to start using race when evaluating others? Although many different forms of cultural input may support the emergence of race as a meaningful social dimension for children (for discussion, see Refs 7 and 24), social status plays an important role in guiding children's racial attitudes.

RACE AND SOCIAL STATUS

Studies comparing the attitudes of children from high- and low-status racial groups suggest that social status is relevant to

understanding children's racial preferences. While White children in late preschool and early elementary school tend to favor members of their own race, members of other racial and ethnic groups often do not. For example, young African American children most commonly like Black and White people equally on measures of social attitudes (see Ref. 25, for a review). Even in South Africa, a country where Blacks are the statistical majority, White children tend to favor their own racial group while Black children do not (26).

Three other lines of research further support the hypothesis that information about social status guides children's racial preferences. First, as early as age 4, children use at least one aspect of social status—namely, how wealthy or poor someone is—to evaluate others. In one study (27), 4- and 5-year-olds rated a puppet with more resources as “nicer” than a puppet with fewer resources. In another study (28), 4- to 6-year-olds said they liked and would prefer to befriend children who had items (e.g., school supplies, clothing, houses) that conveyed greater wealth than children whose items conveyed less wealth. Thus, children like individuals who appear to have more or higher quality resources. Children's prowealth attitudes are particularly relevant in the context of thinking about their racial attitudes, given that race and wealth are correlated (e.g., in the United States, the median wealth of White families is 20 times that of Black families; 29).

Second, as early as age 4, children think Whites are wealthier than Blacks, and children's beliefs about race and status are associated with their racial attitudes (28, 30). For example, in one study (30), Black, White, and multiracial children's awareness of the South African racial status hierarchy (i.e., that White individuals have higher socioeconomic status than multiracial and Black individuals) correlated positively with children's tendency to prefer White over Black and multiracial individuals.

Third, in experimental research (31), social class differences served as a catalyst for biased group evaluations. In one experiment, 4- and 5-year-olds were introduced to two groups distinguished by the color of their clothes. One group was depicted as wealthy, while the other was shown to be poor (as indicated by group members' houses and other possessions). Wealth differences were never pointed out to the children, and which group was wealthier was counterbalanced across participants. At test, participants saw new members of the two groups—without any cues about wealth—and were asked whom they liked. Children preferred new people who matched the group membership of those depicted originally as wealthy.

To test whether children liked members of the wealthy group because that group had been depicted with likable things, a new group of children saw the same novel groups paired with valenced stimuli that did not convey information about wealth (i.e., brightly colored vs. dull stimuli). In this control condition, children liked new members of the two groups equally. Thus, children do not always prefer groups that have been associated

with positive attributes (in this case, rooms with brightly colored walls). In a final experiment, children were randomly assigned to be members of either the wealthy group or the poor group. Those assigned to the wealthy group preferred members of their own group, whereas those assigned to the poor group did not. These results parallel findings from studies of Black and White children's racial attitudes, and suggest that wealth differences between groups can play a causal role in guiding children's intergroup biases.

QUESTIONS

Although the field has progressed toward understanding children's thinking about gender, race, and social status, many questions remain. I conclude by raising four issues that merit attention and suggest ways to address them.

First, why is gender so central to young children's social thinking? Humans evolved in environments where tracking other people's gender was critical for social decisions (e.g., mating choices), so children's early sensitivity to gender may be supported by innate, dedicated cognitive machinery (32). However, children may learn to attend to gender. Most children in studies of gender development come from families with a salient example of a male (i.e., a father) alongside a salient example of a female (i.e., a mother), so these children may have learned from experiences at home that gender is a critical distinction. Children also may learn to attend to gender from social messages embedded in language and cultural practices (see Ref. 7, for a discussion). Studying children who have both limited sociocultural experiences (e.g., young infants) and those with varied sociocultural experiences (e.g., children from LGBTQ families, children attending gender-neutral schools) should shed light on mechanisms supporting the prominence of gender in the minds of young children as well as adults.

Second, what role, if any, does social status play in guiding children's gender-based social preferences? In many cultures, males are generally regarded as having higher social status than females and children sometimes associate gender and status (33, 34). Yet unlike in the case of race, both girls (i.e., members of the lower status group) and boys (i.e., members of the higher status group) prefer individuals who match their own gender at least as early as the preschool years (17). Gender-based status differences may be less perceptible to young children than race-based status differences. Consistent with this hypothesis, in one study (34), 11- to 12-year-olds (but not 6- and 8-year-olds) rated novel occupations greater in status when they were depicted being carried out by male workers than when they were shown with female workers. However, in a separate study (35), boys' level of own-gender favoritism declined with age, and by adulthood, males preferred females on tests probing implicit and explicit gender attitudes. The role of status in guiding children's gender preferences is therefore unclear. Researchers should examine the thinking of younger children

about gender and status (focusing on status cues that are relevant to children's social evaluations) and test for correlations between status perceptions and gender preferences in young children.

Third, what are the developmental origins of children's preferences for those who are higher in social status? Infants and children apparently perceive and understand many dimensions of status early in development (36–39), but the field has yet to fully explore which dimensions of status affect infants' and young children's social evaluations. For example, when does classism emerge in development? Do infants attend to the quantity or quality of people's material possessions, and do they use such information to evaluate individuals? How closely do children's emerging concerns about social status, preferences, and inferences track with their emerging race-based preferences in the preschool years?

Fourth, are social status cues special or powerful in their ability to guide children's attention to, and preferences for, collections of people? Social status is not the only factor that draws children's attention to a distinction or causes children to favor one group over another. For example, providing labels and using generic language can highlight social groupings for children (7, 40–43), and children sometimes favor groups in the absence of any depicted differences in social status (44). Researchers should compare directly the potency of social status differences to other property differences in guiding children's consideration of different social groupings.

CONCLUSIONS

Developmental psychologists have made advances in characterizing the origins and development of children's social categories and intergroup biases, as well as children's emerging understanding of social status. Nevertheless, many questions remain. Beyond enriching academic theories of how children understand the world around them, research on children's naïve sociology is important for practical reasons: Prejudice is a social problem that can be challenging to address in adulthood. A deeper understanding of the mechanisms supporting the emergence of social group preferences in childhood may help us design strategies to reduce—or even prevent—harmful biases early in development.

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