SEX AND RACE FRIENDSHIP PREFERENCES AS EXPRESSED BY PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

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The Problem and Previous Research

The general objective of this study is to examine sex and race friendship preferences as expressed by a group of white preschool children. The literature suggests that children react differently to both these factors, but the divergent findings and lack of information at the early age levels permit no clear-cut conclusions to several important questions. Do preschool children of different ages exhibit a preference for persons of their own sex and race? Which factor, sex or race, emerges earlier? Are the same tendencies displayed, to the same degree, by boys and girls?

Before reviewing the literature pertinent to racial attitudes, it may be well to cite the findings concerning the ability of children of preschool age to make racial differentiations. Horowitz[6] studied 24 Negro and white preschool children of lower socio-economic status. She found that the children were able to discriminate between pictures of white and Negro children. Springer[11] asked a large number of preschool Oriental and white children to select from pictures the child who looked most like themselves. The vast majority of non-Orientals (89 %) chose pictures of non-Orientals.

Clark and Clark[2] conducted a study among a mixed socio-economic group of 150 Negro preschool children. One of their purposes was to observe the development of race consciousness. Their results indicated an ability to differentiate on the basis of color.

Because of the consistent conclusions in the literature with regard to the early development of racial awareness, the writers felt secure in assuming that four-and five-year-olds could discriminate on this basis. Findings in the realm of racial attitudes, however, are less clear-cut. The present study is concerned in part with the age at which children first show by behavior their awareness of racial differences.

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Landreth and Johnson[8] developed a picture inset test to examine the reactions of children of preschool age to skin color. Their subjects were 228 Negro and white preschool children from upper and lower social levels. In general their results indicate that by three years of age children have begun to react differentially according to skin color and that the tendency for white skinned children to select white skinned persons increases during the fourth and fifth years. The findings with respect to white children of the upper social class are interesting because of the similarity of this group to the sample in the present study. In contrast to the general conclusions, there were no significant age trends between three and five years in choice of white insets among either girls or boys. Sex differences in choice of white insets were not significant at the three-year level; at the five-year level significantly more girls than boys chose white insets. Landreth and Johnson have attributed the lack of positive findings among these groups to the fact that the upper class children viewed the series as a matching problem.

Helgerson[4] conducted a study in which she attempted to determine "the relative significance of race, sex and facial expression in choice of playmate by the preschool child." The sample consisted of 108 white and 27 Negro preschool and kindergarten children. She also concluded that the sex factor is of greater significance than the race factor and that girls tend more than boys to choose their own sex. (Tests of significance are not presented for these latter conclusions, but the magnitude of the differences suggests that they are tenable.)

Helgerson's findings with respect to age trends in sex choice are relevant. Sixty-three per cent of the younger boys' and 66 per cent of the older boys' choices favored boys. Among the girls the choices of 83 per cent of the younger and 72 per cent of the older ones favored girls.

There is little question that preschool children are aware of sex differences. Furthermore, with the primary exception of Moreno[10] who finds little evidence of sex cleavage before age seven or eight, there are several well conducted studies showing actual social cleavage based on sex at the preschool and kindergarten levels. For example, Lippitt[9] and Koch[7] used a paired comparison technique among groups of preschool children. They showed, independently, that children have definite preferences for members of their own sex. Similarly, Challman[1] observed that before the age of five there is a strong tendency for boys and girls to form friendships within their own sex.

When one attempts to delineate the earlier emergence of sexual as compared to racial attitudes, however, the contributions in the literature lead to controversial conclusions. For example, Criswell's classic study involved both sexual and racial cleavage. She found that in kindergarten, the earliest age group studied, cleavages based on sex differences were greater than those based on race differences. This finding suggests agreement with Helgerson's conclusions and might lead one to assume that sex preference emerges earlier than race preference.

On the other hand, Horowitz and Horowitz[5] concluded that in the development of social attitudes children attach greater significance to race than sex, suggesting that differentiations on the basis of race occur earlier than those based on sex.

Sample

Children attending the Child Development Laboratory of the University of Nebraska served as subjects for this study. The original sample consisted of 53 children, but five children either refused to respond or did not complete the experiment and were eliminated. Thus, the data were computed on a total of 48 subjects. Children attending the laboratory were white except for one Negro boy who was enrolled while the study was in progress and who was not included in the sample.

Table 1 presents the distribution of the sample according to age and sex.

TABLE 1

THE SAMPLE CLASSIFIED IN AGE AND SEX GROUPS

Age	Sex	
	Boys	Girls
Four (3.51-4.50)	7	9
Five (4.51-5.50)	19	13
	26	22

With regard to the socio-economic status of the subjects, most of the parents owned their own homes; only a few of the mothers were employed; and the majority of the fathers were engaged in professions or high level occupations. Thus, the children in most cases were from upper-middle socio-economic backgrounds.

Revised Stanford-Binet scores were not available for all the children; but the mean I. Q. of the 23 who had been tested was 123.13.

These 23 children were randomly selected for testing and so this average may be assumed to be representative of the group as a whole.

Since the sample falls in the upper-middle socio-economic range and in the "very superior" intellectual range, the applicability of the conclusions are limited to this extent.

Method

Forty photographs, each with the same neutral background, were taken of kindergarteners and first graders in a Lincoln, Nebraska, elementary school. This school had both Negro and white pupils. The children were selected so as to provide an equal number of boys, girls, Negroes, and whites. The forty photographs were rated for attractiveness by three independent judges. Sixteen pictures (four Negro girls, four Negro boys, four white girls, four white boys) were finally retained for the study. They all had received ratings of "average attractiveness" by each judge.

From reprints of these 16 photographs two series of pictures were developed, one series for determining sex-preference and one for determining race preference. Each series contained all 16 photographs and 32 pairs of pictures. In the sex-choice series white boys were matched with white girls and Negro boys with Negro girls. In the race-choice series white boys were matched with Negro boys and white girls with Negro girls.

Preliminary tests and a review of literature revealed several factors which would tend to bias the children's responses. An attempt was made to control for all known sources of bias. For example, in order to hold constant the influence of place preference each individual picture in a series was presented twice on the left side and twice on the right side. (Appendix A shows the entire pattern.) To control further for the effects of response set and biases resulting from fatigue factors the series and pictures were reversed for every second child.

Each series was presented once to a subject and two sessions were necessary to complete the testing. The interval between sessions was at least one day and not more than 14 days, the mean being approximately six days.

At the beginning of each series the examiner presented the unopened booklet of photographs and made the following statement:

> "These are some pictures of children you do not know. I want you to tell me which child you would like to play with. Turn the pages one at a time and choose the one you would like for a friend. Remember, choose a friend."

Toward the end of the statement the examiner turned the cover page revealing the first pair of pictures. If the child did not answer, the following statement was added: "Which one would you choose as a friend? Choose one." After the choice the child was told: "Now turn the page and choose one." This procedure was followed until the series was completed. During the administration the examiner unobtrusively recorded each of the responses on a check sheet which was shielded from the child's sight.

Results

Age and sex differences in the expressed sex and race friendship preferences of the subjects were determined by computing the average choice frequency for each of four groups (four-year-olds, five-year-olds, boys, and girls). The data for white race and same sex choices are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2

STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND MEANS OF THE CHOICES OF AGE AND SEX GROUPS FOR WHITE RACE AND SAME SEX

Group	N	Choice of White Race		Choice of Same Sex	
		Mean	S	Mean	S
4 years old	16	16.375	5.667	18.312	4.881
5 years old	32	21.281	8.133	21.406	6.058
Boys	26	21.346	7.386	20.615	6.848
Girls	22	17.636	7.749	20.091	4.889

It may be seen that the mean choices of all groups are above the hypothetical mean of 16.00. Since the subjects tended to choose more pictures of white and same sexed children, the data were analyzed from this point of view.

T values were computed to determine whether differences in the race and sex preferences of the groups were statistically significant.

The t-test given in table 3 reveals that in the race choice series preference for white race is significant at the 1 per cent level of confidence in two of the four groups. In the four-year-old group the difference in preference frequency between pictures of Negro and white children is not significant, with a probability of above 50 per cent. Thus the increase in age from four to five years reflects a significant increase in the choice of white pictures.

TABLE 3

T VALUES FOR AGE AND SEX GROUPS IN RACE (WHITE) AND SEX (SAME) CHOICES BASED ON THE DIFFERENCE FROM A HYPOTHETICAL MEAN 16.00

Race Choice (White)		Sex Choice (Same)	
Groups	N	t Value	t Value
4 Years old	16	0.265	1.895
5 Years old	32	3.672 **	5.048 **
Boys	26	3.692 **	3.436 **
Girls	22	0.990	3.926 **

In the group of girls the difference in preference frequency between pictures of Negro and white children is not statistically significant, with a probability of about 30 per cent.

In the sex choice series the preference for the same sex is significant at the 1 per cent confidence level for five-year-old boys and girls. In the four-year-old group the difference in preference frequency between their own sex and the different sex is not significant, with a probability above 5 percent.

One final question was to be answered before confidence could be placed in the findings. Was there, despite our efforts to control attractiveness, any picture which differed significantly in attractiveness from the others in its photographic group? The Chi square results are presented in table 4.

TABLE 4

CHI SQUARE VALUES FOR ATTRACTIVENESS BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL PICTURES

Photographic Groups	N	Chi Square Values	Degrees of Freedom	P
White Boys	4	0.446	3	>.50
White Girls	4	0.776	3	>.50
Negro Boys	4	1.243	3	>.50
Negro Girls	4	1.856	3	>.50

They indicate that there were no significant differences in the choice of any individual photograph. In fact, in all cases probabilities were greater than 50 per cent that such differences were the result of random variation.

Conclusions

The findings are limited because of sample size. Larger groups would have been desirable, especially in the case of the four-year-olds. The conclusions are restricted to white children in the upper

middle socio-economic range. The data are further limited by the technique (i. e. photographs) and the single criterion (i. e. choice of a friend) which were used to reveal the racial and sexual attitudes of the subjects.

Within these limits several clear-cut conclusions may be drawn:

1. Sex preferences are evident earlier than race preferences. By age four both boys and girls display a slight tendency in favor of their own sex.

2. Race preferences are not present to a significant degree at age four, but by the fifth year boys and girls show a definite preference for their own race.

3. Boys and girls differ significantly in their race choices. (There appears to be a strong trend for boys to be more in favor of their own race than girls.)

4. Boys and girls prefer their own sex about the some degree.

APPENDIX A

SCHEME OF THE PICTURE ARRANGEMENTS

Sex Choice Cards				Race Choice Cards			
White-White Boy-Girl		Negro-Negro Boy-Girl		Negro-White Girl-Girl		Negro-White Boy-Boy	
A	E	I	M	E	M	A	I
F	A	N	I	N	E	J	A
A	G	I	O	E	O	A	K
H	A	P	I	P	E	L	A
B	F	J	P	F	N	B	J
E	B	M	J	M	F	I	B
B	H	J	N	F	P	B	L
G	B	O	J	O	F	K	B
C	E	K	M	G	M	C	I
F	C	N	K	N	G	J	C
C	G	K	O	G	O	C	K
H	C	P	K	P	G	L	C
D	H	L	P	H	P	D	L
E	D	M	L	M	H	I	D
D	F	L	N	H	N	D	J
G	D	O	L	O	H	K	D

Summary

This study examined the sex and race friendship preferences expressed by preschool children. The sample consisted of 48 four-and five-year-old, white, upper-middle social class children attending the University of Nebraska Child Development Laboratory. Photographs of Negro and white boys and girls were used to develop two series of pictures, one for sex and one for race preference.

Techniques were used to control for biasing factors, and a uniform statement was made to each subject at the beginning of the test session. T test revealed that sex preferences occur earlier than race preferences; boys and girls exhibit about the same degree of preference for their own sex, but there appears to be a strong trend for boys to favor their own race.

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