Children as young as 4-years-old view race as heritable and stable, but it is unclear whether they view it as predictive of behavioral and psychological traits, a causal essentialist view of race.

Do children have causal essentialist beliefs about race?

Essentialist beliefs about race vary by culture, and seem to require ample input to emerge.

What environmental input shapes these beliefs?

Essentialist beliefs are thought to underlie prejudicial attitudes, and are associated with greater prejudice towards minorities in White and Black adults.

What are the implications of these beliefs on intergroup attitudes in children?

Methods & Results

5 and 6-year olds N = 204 (White: n = 123; Black: n = 81)

Switched at birth task

A baby was born to this mom, but was raised by this mom (or vice versa)

Think about this baby when it’s grown up…

What will it look like? What will it be like?

Race: $\chi^2(1) = 1.45, p = .228$

Property type: $\chi^2(5) = 10.42, p = .301$

Race x property type: $\chi^2(2) = 2.02, p = .156$

5- and 6-year-olds view skin color as heritable, but have much weaker causal essentialist beliefs about race

At this age, Black children express slightly greater racial essentialism than White children

Greater exposure to racial outgroup associated with weaker racial essentialism for White and Black children

There was no effect of outgroup exposure on children’s beliefs about heritability of skin color

Racial essentialism associated with negative attitudes toward Blacks among Black, but not White, children

Feelings thermometer task

Children were asked how much they did or did not like a kid.

Asked for 3 White and 3 Black children, with ratings averaged across each group separately


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