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Now you see race, now you don't: Verbal cues influence children's racial stability judgments

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that young children do not consistently believe that race is stable (e.g., that a Black child will grow up to be a Black adult). Here, we tested the strength of White and minority children's beliefs by testing whether verbal cues influenced the extent to which they believed in the relative stability of race versus emotional expression. We presented participants (5–6 years, 9–10 years, adults) with images of children who were Black or White, and happy or angry, and asked them to indicate which of two adults each child would grow up to be: one matching on emotion but not race, or one matching on race but not emotion. Verbal cuing had strong effects on both younger and older children's choices (e.g., cuing emotional expressions strengthened emotion-matches; cuing skin color strengthened race-matches), although racial minorities were less susceptible to cuing. Verbal cues had weaker effects on children's judgments about the stability of gender. These results show that race concepts vary across age and racial groups, that verbal framing influences younger and older children's beliefs about racial stability, and that belief in racial stability is relatively weak between the ages of 5 and 10.

Lauer: Let me just ask you the question in simple terms again because you've sent mixed signals over the years, are you an African American woman?

Dolezal: I identify as Black.

Lauer: You identify as Black. Let me put a picture up of you in your early twenties…when you see this picture…is she an African-American woman or a Caucasian woman?

Dolezal: I would say that visibly she would be identified as White, by people who see her.

Lauer: But at the time were you identifying yourself as African-American?

Dolezal: In that picture, during that time, no.

–Interview of Rachel Dolezal by Matt Lauer on the *Today* show (Dolezal, 2015).

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1. Introduction

Rachel Dolezal had two self-identified White parents, identified as White as a child, and identified as Black as an adult. Because of her self-professed racial identity, Rachel became a headline in 2015, with many reacting with outrage that she would choose to adopt a different racial identity than she was assigned at birth. Embedded in this complex case is a core issue that is the heart of the current studies: Is it possible for an individual to change their race (see Hobbs, 2014)? We examine the question from a developmental perspective, to ask when, and with what degree of certainty, children treat a person's race as stable over time.

Understanding the development of racial stability concepts is important for understanding the development of essentialist beliefs more broadly (i.e., the belief that category membership is objective, absolute, inductively potent, immutable, and stable; Gelman, 2003; Prentice & Miller, 2007; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). Adults often essentialize race: they believe that race reflects real and objective "kinds" of people, is important for making inferences about individuals, has always existed throughout human history, and is an unchangeable aspect of an individual's identity (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Haslam & Whelan, 2008).

In contrast to studies with adults, research with children suggests that racial essentialism may develop with age and as a function of social experiences. For example, during kindergarten, children in both rural and urban communities treat racial categories as determined subjectively and by convention, whereas by age 10, children in rural communities (but not in urban communities) treat racial categories as determined objectively and by nature (Rhodes & Gelman, 2009). U.S. children are more likely than Israeli children to develop the concept that race is objective, thus indicating cross-cultural variation in racial essentialism (Diesendruck, Goldfein-Elbaz, Rhodes, Gelman, & Neumark, 2013). Moreover, the extent to which children categorize Multiracial children into different "kinds" of people varies as a function of their age, race, and experiences with inter-group contact (Roberts & Gelman, 2015; Roberts & Gelman, 2017). Regarding the belief that race is inductively potent, although by age 4, children use race to make inferences about a person's wealth (Olson, Shutts, Kinzler, & Weisman, 2012; Shutts, 2015), social relationships (Shutts, Pemberton, Roben, & Spelke, 2013), and language (Hirschfeld & Gelman, 1997), the extent of these inferences varies as a function of children's awareness of racial hierarchies (e.g., that White individuals have higher socioeconomic status than Black individuals; Olson et al., 2012) and their own racial group membership (e.g., Multiracial children make different inferences than White children; Roberts, Williams, & Gelman, in press). We turn next to studies examining the belief that race is stable across an individual's lifespan, which is the central focus of the present research.

1.1. Children's concept of racial stability

In several independent investigations, researchers examined children's concepts of racial stability, though because of differences in methodologies, populations, and results, the extent to which this concept varies across age and racial clear remained unclear. Hirschfeld (1995) presented children with a triad task that assessed the extent to which they believed that race was more stable across the lifespan than occupation or body build (e.g., on occupation trials, children were shown a Black adult in a police uniform, paired with a Black child in plain clothing [race match] and a White child in a police uniform [occupation match], and were then asked to indicate which of the two children was a picture of the adult when as a child). At age 4, although children judged race to be more stable than occupation, they did not judge race to be more stable than body build. At age 7, children judged race to be more stable than both occupation and body build.

Similarly, Kinzler and Dautel (2012) showed White 5- to 6-year-olds, White 9- to 10-year-olds, and Black 5- to 6-year-olds triads consisting of one target child and two adults. One adult matched the target child in language but not race (language-match), and the other adult matched the target child in race but not language (race-match). On each trial, children were first introduced to a target child and told, "Here is a child [pointing], he/she sounds like this." The target child was then shown, a voice clip was played, and the target child was then concealed again. This was then repeated for two adult response options, and children were then asked which adult each child would grow up to be. White 9- to 10-year-olds and Black 5- to 6-year-olds chose the race-match, thus judging race to be stable. In contrast, White 5- to 6-year-olds chose the language-match, thereby reasoning that a person could change race across their lifespan. This was found for children living in urban and racially heterogeneous contexts as well as children living in rural and racially homogeneous contexts. These data show the role of development and social group membership in racial stability judgments, such that older children and minority children were more likely to think of race as stable (likely as a result of increased race-based experiences).

Pauker, Ambady, & Apfelbaum (2010), Pauker, Ambady, & Apfelbaum (2015) presented children with a three-item test that assessed children's reasoning about racial stability: what a child would look like as an adult (e.g., White child matched with White adult and Black adult choices), what an adult looked like as a child (e.g., Black adult matched with White child and Black child choices), and whether someone could change their skin color. Overall, older children (ages 7–11) conceptualized race as more stable than younger children (ages 3–6), and among older children, the belief that race was stable was greater among children from a homogenous context (i.e., Massachusetts) compared to children from a more racially diverse context (i.e., Hawai'i).

Most recently, Roberts and Gelman (2016) argued that the research reviewed above, although important, did not provide clear insight into when children, particularly those of different racial backgrounds, reason that race is stable. For example, Roberts and Gelman suggested that children who judged that race was more stable than occupation (see Hirschfeld, 1995) could have done so because occupation was not sufficiently salient, and that children who judged that race was less stable than language (Kinzler & Dautel, 2012) may have reflected their beliefs about language more than their beliefs about race (for a fuller critique, see Roberts & Gelman, 2016; p. 888). Therefore, to provide a further test of children's racial stability concepts, Roberts and Gelman (2016) examined children's stability judgments of race relative to emotional expressions, as children understand emotions to be