

Can white kids grow up to be black? Some preschoolers think so

May 20 2016, by Jared Wadley

White preschoolers often believe a person's race can change over time. In fact, these 5- to 6-year-olds may think they can grow up to become a black adult, according to a new University of Michigan study.

Steven Roberts, a U-M doctoral student and the study's lead author, says that although [children](#) may be aware of races other than their own, they don't have a strong understanding of what [race](#) is—at least not to the degree of adults.

Roberts and colleague Susan Gelman, U-M professor of psychology and linguistics, examined the extent that children believed race was stable; that is, whether a [black](#) child would grow up to be a black adult.

The experiment included 74 children and 28 adults. Children were recruited in the Midwest at museums, and adults were recruited online. The data were collected between 2014 and 2015.

They showed participants pictures of children who were happy or angry and black or [white](#), and asked them to indicate which of two adults each child would grow up to be. One adult matched the child in emotion (but not race) and the other matched the child in race (but not emotion).

Participants could have chosen a same-emotion but different race match, or a same-race but different emotion match.

White adults, white 9- to 10-year-olds and racial minority 5- to 6-year-

olds selected the same-race matches, which meant they believed, for instance, that a white child would grow up to be a white adult.

But white 5- to 6-year-olds showed a different pattern. They selected the same-emotion and same-race matches at equal rates, which meant they were not committed to the belief that race was stable.

"These data suggest that beliefs about racial stability vary by age and race, and that at an early age, children do not have strong beliefs about race. They don't even believe that race is stable," Roberts said. "Because of this, white 5- to 6-year-olds may be less likely to use race as a way to discriminate against other children when selecting who to play with, for example."

One possible reason underlying these differences could be experience. Roberts says black children might learn about [racial differences](#) at younger ages because of their exposure to more [racial diversity](#), whereas their white peers might not get those experiences until they attend grade school.

The findings appear in *Developmental Psychology*.

More information: Steven O. Roberts et al. Can White Children Grow Up to Be Black? Children's Reasoning About the Stability of Emotion and Race., *Developmental Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1037/dev0000132](https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000132)

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