



Science, Civil Rights, and the Doll Test

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Martin Luther King day was last month, and this month is Black History month. We remember the Civil Rights movement. At the center of the story was a Supreme Court ruling, [Brown v. Board of Education](#), which mandated schools across the country integrate. Two black scientists explored the effects of segregation on children. Their “Doll Test” played a key role in the Supreme Court’s reasoning to this decision.

A black child sits in a room with four dolls on the table. Two of the dolls have brown skin and black hair. Two of the dolls have white skin and yellow hair. The scientist sits at the table with the child. Then, he asks the child a series of questions.

1. Give me the doll that you like to play with
2. Give me the doll that is a nice doll
3. Give me the doll that looks bad
4. Give me the doll that is a nice color
5. Give me the doll that looks like a white child
6. Give me the doll that looks like a colored child
7. Give me the doll that looks like a Negro child
8. Give me the doll that looks like you

The child’s responses are recorded, and the experiment ends. The responses are tallied, and we learned something about ourselves.

To everyone’s surprise, the responses from the Southern and Northern school kids were very similar. Most children preferred the white dolls over the colored dolls in all aspects. 67% indicated that they preferred to play with the white doll, 59% thought that the white doll was “nice” and only 17% thought that the white doll looks bad. In contrast, as high as 59% of these children indicated that the brown doll “looks bad”. Remember, all these children were black.

The response to the last question was most disturbing.

“Give me the doll that looks like you”

At this question, Clarks reported that some children “broke down and cried”. Two even stormed out of the testing room, “unconsoled, convulsed in tears”. Dr. Kenneth Clark would later recall and conclude that “color in a racist society was a very disturbing and traumatic component of an individual’s sense of his own self-esteem and worth”.

This heartbreaking response is still with us. Children who took the test in 2007 would also break down in tears as they saw themselves in the rejected doll.

The “Doll Test” is arguably one of the most socially important scientific experiments because of its role in the Civil Rights movement, making the case against segregation. Taking place around the mid-twentieth century, husband and wife, [Kenneth](#) and [Mamie Clark](#), asked this set of questions to 253 children. They were mainly interested in understanding the impact of segregation on children’s racial preference (see question 1-4), racial awareness (5-7), and self-identification (8).

About half of these 3-7 year-olds were from segregated schools in southern Arkansas. They did not have much interaction with white kids. The other half went to integrated schools in the northern state of Massachusetts.

At the time when this study took place, there was an expectation that the Northern part of the country should be a more welcoming place for the black community. Many African-Americans migrated North to flee the hostility of the South. At that time, the Chicago march that would only take place much later in 1966 has yet to reveal that the virulence of that hatred was far worse than they expected.



Civil Rights Act

The study gained spotlight when in 1954, The U.S. Supreme Court cited it as one of the factors determining its deliberation of the Brown v. Board of Education case. This case saw the unanimous ruling of racial segregation in public schools. Many attributed this momentous event as a legal precedent to what would later culminate into the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The Doll Test to the Brown v. Board of Education put on display the detrimental effect of public school segregation on the psychology of the students. This effect later supported the overturning of the “separate but equal” doctrine, confirming that separate educational facilities can not be inherently equal.

The Doll Test itself, however, was not without criticism.

Most importantly, and unexplained at the time, the study showed that children from the integrated (mixed) schools were more likely to evaluate the brown dolls negatively. As we will soon see, the order of the questions matters too.

The study also seems to provide minimal measures to eliminate biases and external influences. Being conducted by two black academics, the study also has a potential risk of unintended or intended biases when it comes to evaluating particular racial groups. The fact that the researchers had to paint the white dolls brown because brown dolls were not yet manufactured at the time, means that these dolls may appear very unusual to the children and as a result influenced their preferences.

There are legitimate questions, also, about how to interpret the meaning of these observations. Professor of African and African American Studies, Robin Bernstein, would go as far as to argue that,

“the choices made by the subjects of the Clark doll tests was not necessarily an indication of black self-hatred. Instead, it was a cultural choice between two different toys—one that was to be loved and one that was to be physically harassed, as exemplified in performance and popular media.”

TABLE 5
CHOICES OF ALL SUBJECTS

Choice	Request 1 (play with)		Request 2 (nice doll)		Request 3 (looks bad)		Request 4 (nice color)	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Colored doll	83	32	97	38	149	59	96	38
White doll	169	67	150	59	42	17	151	60
Don't know or no response	1	1	6	3	62	24	6	2

In his view, the narrative of the Doll Test in the context of the 1964 Civil Rights Act comes in contrast to the racial pride, dignity and autonomy displayed by the African-Americans involved in the movement. It also undermined the resilience of black and brown communities who actively defend their cultural heritage.

Nevertheless, Clarks' Doll Test became a prototype for numerous follow-up studies that have kept the conversation on racial segregation in children alive.

The 21st Century Doll Test

Since the publication of the original test, many have been curious enough to confirm the results for themselves. In 2010, CNN hired a child psychologist and professor, Margaret Beale Spencer to design a pilot study based on the original Doll Test. The study, which included both white and black children, revealed the very different attitudes that these children have towards race. A higher proportion of children identified black figures with negative attributes, and white figures with positive attributes.

How do these findings on early childhood relate to their later development?

One of the uniqueness of the Doll Test is its relatively simple method of revealing something so profound. In 2007, the 'Media That Matters' film festival Diversity Award went to “A Girl Like Me”, a seven-minutes film put together by Reel Works Teen Filmmaking. The film featured four teenage girls' who shared their experiences of growing up as a black girl. In this short documentary, we saw how the impact of racial bias from a very young age carries through to teenagehood. They were made to accept that beauty depends on having fair skin and straight hair. They were forced to believe that something was *wrong* with the way they look.

“I wish I was just like the Barbie doll”, said one of them. One teenager even went on to repeat the Doll Study herself to emphasize this point. For these teenagers, the truth revealed from the Doll Test was not so distant from their present reality.

The biggest takeaway of these studies was the fact that the impact of discrimination is pervasive even at an early age. It is not hard to imagine how it would affect all walks of life. Today, around 6 decades after the case was overturned, we still live in a deeply fractured society.

Remembering and understanding this history does not change society. Still, it is the first step towards actions that can change society. This is one reason we talk about race, even when it is difficult. In the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “the time is always right to do what's right.”

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