

## **The “Doll Studies”, Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie P. Clark, 1947**

Simon Howard, Ph.D. and Kalen Kennedy, M.S.

Marquette University

The experiments colloquially known as the “doll studies” were a series of studies performed by Mamie P. Clark and her husband Kenneth B. Clark in the 1940’s. The purpose of the experiments was to explore how African-American children developed a sense of self. Additionally, the Clarks were interested in Black children’s racial preferences and self-esteem. In these studies, the Clarks used four diaper-clad dolls that were identical in every respect, with one exception: Two of the dolls were Black and the other two were White. These dolls were displayed before Black children between the ages of 3 and 7 while an adult asked them a series of questions. In most of the studies, children were asked eight questions: 1) “Give me the doll that you would like to play with or like best”, 2) “Give me the doll that is the 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”, and 8) Give me the doll that looks like you.” The first four questions were designed to reveal the children’s racial preferences, while questions five through seven were used to test the children’s knowledge of racial differences. The last question addressed how children self-identify.

The results of the doll studies were clear; a majority of the Black children had a preference for the White dolls. When the children were asked which doll they preferred and which was "nice" and "pretty," the majority of the kids attributed positive characteristics to the White dolls. The negative characteristics however were primarily attributed to the Black dolls. In terms of racial identification, 90% of the children were able to accurately identify the dolls as

White or colored; however, 33-50% of the Black children identified themselves with the White doll. Kenneth Clark recalls that a few children so emotionally upset during the experiment, they stormed out of the room after identifying with the doll they liked least and described as bad. For the Clarks, the results of the doll studies demonstrated the psychological consequence of racial segregation. They reasoned that when Black children learned they could not attend the same schools as White children, and had to attend inferior schools, relative to those attended by their White counterparts; this led Black children to internalize anti-Blackness, resulting in a negative sense of self and lower self-esteem. These findings had a large impact in developmental psychology as it increased research in areas of self-esteem and self-concept.

Another impact of the doll studies, and arguably the most significant, is the role they played in the landmark civil rights case *Brown v. Board of Education*, which overturned state sponsored segregation in the United States. The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund read an article authored by Kenneth Clark regarding the doll studies and asked him and his wife to provide expert testimony in the lower-court state cases that provided the basis for *Brown*. Kenneth Clark's testimony, which included the doll test and other social science research, was cited by Chief Justice Warren in the *Brown* decision.

The legacy of the doll studies lives on today not only because of the role the studies played in *Brown*, but also because the studies' results can still be demonstrated today. A number of contemporary replications have been conducted all mirroring the findings from the original studies conducted in the 1940's; many Black children still show a racial preference for Whiteness. Unlike the 1940's, however, the results of the dolls test are no longer interpreted as a consequence of racial segregation, but as a consequence of being socialized in a society that disproportionately associates positive images to Whiteness (e.g., God, intelligence,) and negative

images to Blackness (e.g., criminals). Whereas, this work was once used to provide support for the idea that integration would prevent Black children from internalizing anti-black bias, developmental psychologists now largely agree that in order to ensure that Black children develop a pro-black identity, it is important for Black children to have Black teachers and be exposed to positive Black media.

### **Further Reading**

Clark, K. B., & Clark, M. P. (1947). Racial identification and preference in Negro children. In T. M. Newcomb & E. L. Hartley (Eds.), *Readings in social psychology* (pp. 602– 611). New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

“Brown at 60: The Doll Test.” (n.d.). Retrieved October 21, 2017, from

<http://www.naacpldf.org/brown-at-60-the-doll-test>.

Beschloss, Michael (2014, May 6). How an experiment with dolls helped lead to school integration. *New York Times*. Retrieved from

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/07/upshot/how-an-experiment-with-dolls-helped-lead-to-school-integration.html>.