Stereotypes and the Clark Doll Test [1]

The Clark Doll Test illustrates the ill effects of stereotyping and racial segregation in America. It illustrated the damage caused by systematic segregation and racism on children's self-perception at the young age of five.

Experiment Background

The Clark Doll test was conducted by Dr. Kenneth Clark and his wife Mamie Clark for her master's degree thesis. The study focused on stereotypes and children's self-perception in relation to their race. The results of Clark's study were used to prove that school segregation was distorting the minds of young black kids, causing them to internalize stereotypes and racism, to the point of making them hate themselves.

The Clark Doll Test is well known due to its social relevance and impact although some say that the results lack experimental weight. It found contrasts among children attending segregated schools in Washington, DC versus those in integrated schools in New York.

In 1954 in Brown v Board of Education, the experiment helped to persuade the American Supreme Court that "separate but equal" schools for blacks and whites were anything but equal in practice and is therefore illegal or against the law. This made the experiment even more controversial. It marked the beginning of the end of Jim Crow.

Methodology

In the experiment, Clark showed black children with ages ranging from 6 to 9, two dolls, one white and the other black, and were asked the following questions in order:

Show me the doll that you like best or that you would like to play with.

Show me the doll that is the 'nice' doll.

Show me the doll that looks 'bad.'

Give me the doll that looks like a white child.

Give me the doll that looks like a colored child.

Give me the doll that looks like a Negro child.

Give me the doll that looks like you.

Results

The researchers found that black children often chose to play with the white dolls more than the black ones. When the kids were asked to fill in a human figure with the color of their own skin, they frequently chose a lighter shade than their actual skin color. The children also gave the color 'white' positive attributes like good and pretty. On the contrary, 'black' was attributed to being bad and ugly.

The last question asked by the researchers was considered the worse since by that point, most of the black children had already identified the black doll as the bad one. Among the subjects, 44% said the white doll looked like them. In past tests however, many of the children refused to pick either doll or just started crying and ran away.

The results were interpreted as good and reliable evidence that black children had internalized racism caused by being discriminated against and stigmatized by segregation.

The study shows the stereotyping of black people as bad and white as nice and more desirable.

Criticisms of the Study

The study has been criticized for being well known only for the reference in the court case as opposed to the intrinsic and experimental value of the work. Many argue that the study lacks theory and control of variables [3]. According to critics, given that an African American couple was the team who conducted the studies, the desirable outcome of wanting to prove African Americans were negatively stereotyped may have caused some partiality or biases [4], and may have skewed the results.

Sources

The Classic Experiments of Aggression, Prejudice and Stereotypes in Social Psychology by Bec Blair [5]

The Clark Doll Experiment [6]

Kenneth and Mamie Clark [7]

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[4] https://staging.explorable.com/research-bias

[5] http://becblair.blogspot.com/2007/09/classic-experiments-of-aggression

[6] http://abagond.wordpress.com/2009/05/29/the-clark-doll-experiment/

[7] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenneth_and_Mamie_Clark#Doll_experiments