

Black White Colour Bias among Young Malaysian Chinese Children

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ABSTRAK

Daripada kajian awal, didapati bahawa kanak-kanak prasekolah di Amerika Syarikat, Eropah Barat dan Asia Timur menunjukkan sikap tidak adil terhadap warna hitam berbanding dengan warna putih. Dalam kajian ini, cara 'Colour Meaning Test II' diujikan kepada kanak-kanak prasekolah Cina Malaysia yang berusia 5 dan 6 tahun. Purata 'CMT II' yang didapati, iaitu 18.33, menunjukkan sikap tidak adil terhadap warna hitam berbanding dengan warna putih adalah tinggi. Jantina dan umur kanak-kanak tidak memberi kesan yang signifikan kepada purata mata. Sikap tidak adil terhadap warna hitam berbanding dengan warna putih yang tinggi itu menunjukkan bahawa sikap ini adalah universal dan wujudnya pengaruh-pengaruh besar yang telah menyebabkannya. Kanak-kanak ini tidak mempunyai hubungan terus dengan orang-orang yang berkulit putih dan hitam, dan mereka tidak tinggal di dalam masyarakat yang wujud jurang perbezaan taraf sosio-ekonomi di antara orang-orang berkulit putih dan hitam, tetapi mereka didedahkan kepada konsep ras yang dikaitkan dengan warna-warna, seperti putih dan hitam, melalui televisyen. Kajian ini menyokong sebab-sebab utama yang telah dicadangkan bagi sikap tidak adil terhadap warna-warna putih dan hitam, iaitu kebudayaan simbolik, media massa, kesusasteraan dan pengalaman di peringkat awal.

ABSTRACT

Previous studies of preschool children in the United States, Western Europe and Eastern Asia have demonstrated a bias favouring the colour white relative to the colour black. In this study, the Colour Meaning Test II was administered to urban Malaysian Chinese preschoolers, aged 5 and 6 years. The mean Colour Meaning Test II score of 18.33 indicated a definite pro-white/anti-black bias. The sex and age of the child was found to have no significant effect on the test score. The high level of bias favouring the colour white relative to the colour black suggest that the bias is universal and that strong influences have brought about this high level of bias. These children have no direct contact with dark-skinned (black) and light-skinned (white) persons and do not live in a society in which there is a great socio-economic chasm between black and white races, but they are familiar with the concept of races as it relates to black-white skin colour and the designation of persons by colour names through watching television. This study lends support to the main causal factors that have been suggested for colour bias, which are cultural symbolism, mass media, literature and early diurnal experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Research conducted to date demonstrates the existence of a cross-cultural tendency toward the positive evaluation of white and other light colours relative to black and other dark colours (Adams & Osgood, 1973; Williams and Morland, 1976). An exception to white colour preferences was found by May (1977) among 6–17 month old infants, who represented the youngest age group of his study. However, as the groups increased in age up to 4.5 years old, there was a general shift toward white bias.

The development of the evaluation meanings of white and black during childhood has been studied in the United States and several other countries using a picture story technique known as the Color Meaning Test II (Williams and Best, 1975). Studies in the United States reviewed by Williams, Boswell and Best (1975), have demonstrated the colour bias pro-white/antiblack among both Euro-American and Afro-American preschoolers, with less bias in the latter group. Pro-white/anti-black biases also have been found in France and Italy (Best, Naylor and Williams, 1975), in Germany (Best, Field and Williams, 1976) and in Japan (Iwawaki, Sonoo, Williams and Best, 1978). The black-white colour bias was also found among 3 and 4-year-old rural Malay Malaysian children (Rahman, 1983).

This study was, therefore, undertaken to examine the black-white colour preferences of 5 and 6-year-old urban, Malaysian Chinese children, taking into account that these children do not live in a society in which there is a socio-economic chasm between black and white racial groups. However, these children may have acquired knowledge of labelling of races by colour names and of dark-skinned people who occupy a disadvantaged position in a multiracial society through television. The degree of awareness of the connotative meanings of white and black as these colours may be associated with the terms *good* and *bad* among 5 and 6-year-old urban, Malaysian Chinese preschool children is not known.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Subject

The sample consisted of 100 urban Malaysian Chinese preschool children. There were 50 boys and 50 girls ranging in age from 60 months to 81 months. The medium age was 71.5 months. The subjects were selected randomly from 5 kindergartens in Petaling Jaya. The subjects were assumed to come from a homogenous background.

Materials

For the purpose of this study, the Colour Meaning Test II (CMT II), which was developed by Williams and Best (1975), was used. This test has been used in many studies and has been found to be a reliable and valid method of measuring colour bias.

The CMT II test materials consist of 12, 8 × 10 inch coloured photographs and 24 associated stories. Each photograph depicts a drawing of two animals that are identical except that one is coloured white and the other is coloured black. The animals are: horses, dogs, kittens, rabbits, cows, bears, ducks, pigs, chicks, mice, sheep and squirrels. The positive adjectives used in the stories are: friendly, happy, wonderful, healthy, helpful and right. The negative adjectives used are: cruel, sad, selfish, sick, wrong and unfriendly.

Procedure

The Colour Meaning Test II (CMT II) was administered individually to each child by a female Chinese examiner. Each subject was taken aside by the examiner so that the answers given would not be influenced by peers. Testing was done in a quiet, well lighted place and when the subject felt comfortable and cooperative.

The instructions to the subjects were given in English. They were as follows: "What I have here are some pictures I'd like to show you, and stories to go with each one. I want you to help me by pointing to the animal in each picture what

the story is about. Here, I will show you what I mean."

The examiner then placed the CMT II picture book flat on the table in front of the child, opened to the first picture, and read the first story. After the subject had responded, the examiner recorded the choice on the record sheet, then presented the second picture and story. The same procedure was followed until the first twelve stories had been told and responses recorded. After a few minutes break, the examiner used the same pictures in the same order for stories numbered 13 to 24. After the test was completed, the final statement made to the child was: "Thank you (name of the child) for playing this game with me."

RESULTS

A three-way analysis of variance revealed no significant main effect of interactional effects on the test scores due to the age-of child/sex-of-child/ and sex-of-examiner. Since the analysis of variance showed no significant difference, all test scores of the 100 children were combined to determine the group mean, and a two-tailed t-test was used to test for the significance of the difference between the theoretical mean of 12 and the sample mean of 18.33.

The 5 and 6-year-old Malaysian Chinese children obtained a combined mean score of 18.33, with 70% showing definite pro-white/anti-black bias (scores 17-24), 14% showing probable pro-white/anti-black bias (scores 15-16) and 16% showing no bias (scores 10-14). The observed group mean $t = 18.08$, $p = 0.001$, was significantly higher than the theoretical mean of 12. Thus, the Malaysian Chinese children evaluated white more positively than black.

Table 1 shows the percentage of the 100 children responding to positive-adjective with the selection of white animals and Table 2 shows the percentage of children responding to negative adjective with the selection of black animals. The children felt strongly that the

adjective "clean" referred to the white animals, and "dirty" referred to the black animals.

TABLE 1
Percentage of 100 children choosing white animals
in response to positive adjectives

Positive adjectives	Percentage choosing white
Clean	91
Nice	87
Wonderful	84
Friendly	79
Pretty	78
Smart	74
Good	74
Happy	73
Helpful	72
Kind	67
Healty	67
Right	62

TABLE 2
Percentage of 100 children choosing black animals
in response to negative adjectives

Negative adjectives	Percentage choosing black
Dirty	92
Ugly	89
Bad	89
Cruel	81
Wrong	81
Stupid	81
Naughty	79
Selfish	78
Mean	73
Sick	66
Unfriendly	61
Sad	47

DISCUSSION

The results of this study supports the notion of the universality of a pro-white/anti-black bias. This universal phenomena could be due to the diurnal nature of man, whereby man is a day-time organism; his needs for activity and stimulus change, for human interaction and contact comfort are satisfied during the day. Through early experiences, a child learns that a loss of visual orientation and control comes with darkness. Fear of the dark and loudness of thunderstorms is common among children of preschool age and it is first observed in a child at the age of two to four years (Williams and Morland, 1976).

The urban Malaysian Chinese children would normally sleep in a separate room from their parents. Children at the preschool age have already developed an active imagination (Williams and Morland, 1976), and alone in the dark, just before they go to sleep, they could start to imagine frightening things, for example, Is there a ghost in the room? The child imagines that ghosts only stay in the dark, and that if the light is switched on, the ghost would disappear. Darkness is associated with fear and light with fear reduction. Through early experiences with light and darkness, a child develops an aversion to darkness. Since every child has different experiences with light and darkness, we would expect children to have varying degrees of aversion to darkness.

The differences in mean CMT II scores obtained among children of many locations and cultures indicate that racial-colour discrimination and early childhood experiences with light and darkness, due to man's status as a diurnal being, are not the only determinants of the degree of pro-white/anti-black bias. Powerful cultural factors like idiomatic speech and religious as well as supernatural beliefs could act to influence the child's evaluation of the colours white and black. The child might have learnt to evaluate white positively and black negatively as a result of his contact with a culture if white is used to symbolise goodness and black to symbolise badness.

An evaluation of the responses of the children to the positive and negative evaluative adjectives shows that except for the adjective 'sad', the urban Malaysian Chinese children chose the white animals in response to the positive adjectives and black animals in response to the negative adjectives for more than 50% of the choices. The adjectives 'clean' and 'dirty' top the list of adjectives as being the most consistently agreed upon; 19% of the children chose a white animal in response to 'clean' and 92% chose a black animal in response to 'dirty'.

'Dirty' is often associated with black because many things look black when they are dirty. In Cantonese (a Chinese dialect widely spoken in the area of this study), the word 'black' is often used instead of the word 'dirty' to describe something dirty. Thus, to blacken one's clothes means to dirty the clothes. On the other hand the colour white is often associated with cleanliness, as can be seen in the detergent advertisements on television where clothes become spotlessly white after treatment with a cleaning agent.

Eighty-nine percent of the children chose a black animal in response to the negative adjective 'ugly' and 78% chose a white animal in response to the positive adjective 'pretty'. Fair skin is desirable among Malaysian Chinese and is often an attribute of beauty. A fairy tale familiar to these children is that of the ugly black duckling which was transformed into a beautiful white swan.

'Nice', 'wonderful' and 'smart' are positive adjectives that are highly associated with white animals. 'Bad', 'cruel', 'naughty', 'selfish' and 'mean' are negative adjectives highly associated with black animals. Malaysian Chinese frequently associated the colour black with evil, for example, 'black hearted' means cruel. The movie pictures and television often use black-white idioms in their dialogue and in addition, employ the black-white, light-dark symbolism in their visual effects (Williams and Morland, 1976). In children's television programmes, light and darkness are regularly employed to produce emotional effects. Black animals are often portrayed as bad, cruel, naughty, selfish and

mean. Black is a colour that is often used to create mystery, secrecy and evil. In the area of children's literature, wicked witches who practise 'black magic' (evil magic) are attired in black, whereas good fairies are attired in white.

Sixty-seven percent of the children chose the white animal for the adjective 'healthy' and 66% choose the black animal for 'sick'. These percentages are relatively low. This may be due to the fact that children look pale when they are sick. The children may relate white to illness because it is the colour of the doctor's overcoat and the nurse's uniform.

Since black is the colour of mourning in the Chinese culture, one would expect most of the children to choose the black animal to response to the adjective 'sad'. However, only 47% did so. It is possible that the children have not yet learnt to associate the colour black with funerals, which are 'sad events'. The children stay in Petaling Jaya, which is mainly made up of a population of young people and adults, that is, between 0 – 64 years of age (Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations). Moreover, there is no cemetery nearby; thus funerals may be rare events in the neighbourhood. Comparatively, 73% of the children associated a white animal with positive adjective 'happy'. Most children would have known that white is the colour of the bridal gown and that a wedding is a happy occasion. This could have contributed to the association of white with happiness.

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