Effects of Racial Stereotypes and Attitudes on Peer Acceptance and Teacher Preference Among Arab Kindergarten Children

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research investigated the effects of kindergarten children's racial stereotypes and attitudes on peer acceptance as well as their perceptions of teachers of different races in a culturally homogeneous school environment. A three-phase data collection approach comprising participant observation, individual interviews, and focus groups explored the effects of children's racial stereotypes and attitudes toward racial groups on their identification of positive and negative traits in children of other races and their expectations of how others look, think, feel, and act. The sample included 14 kindergarten children, 8 girls and 6 boys. The results revealed positive attitudes toward White individuals and negative stereotypes toward Black individuals. Asian individuals were perceived neutrally and often associated with domestic roles. The findings also suggest that cultural and religious factors influence children's racial perceptions, shaping their social behaviors and preferences. The insights gained from this research are pivotal for educators, policymakers, and researchers dedicated to fostering inclusive and diverse learning environments for all children. Furthermore, the findings contribute to the broader understanding of the development of racial stereotypes in young children.

Keywords: Kindergarten children; racial stereotypes; pepeer acceptance; children's preferences of teachers; racial attitudes.

آثار الصور النمطية والتوجهات العرقية على تقبل الأقران وتفضيلات المعلمين لدى الأطفال العرب في مرحلة رياض الأطفال

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المستخلص

هدف هذا البحث النوعي إلى تعرف آثار الصور النمطية والتوجهات العرقية لدى الأطفال العرب في مرحلة رياض الأطفال على مدى تقبلهم للأقران وتصوراتهم حول المعلمين من الأعراق المختلفة، وذلك في بيئة مدرسية متجانسة ثقافيا تتمثل في إحدى مدارس رياض الأطفال في دولة الكويت. تم جمع البيانات من خلال ثلاث مراحل شملت: الملاحظة، والمقابلات الفردية، والمجموعات المركزة وذلك للتعرف على الصور النمطية التي يحملها الأطفال تجاه الأعراق الأخرى (الأبيض - الأسود - الآسيوي)، وتوجهاتهم نحو تلك الأعراق ومنظورهم للسمات الإيجابية والسلبية التي يحملونها، وكذلك مدى تقبلهم لتكوين العلاقات الاجتماعية مع الطلاب والمعلمين من الأعراق المختلفة. تكونت عينة الدراسة من 14 طفلا في رياض الأطفال، منهم ثمان بنات وستة أولاد. توصلت الباحثتان إلى أن الأطفال المشاركين يحملون توجهات إيجابية تجاه البيض، إلا أنهم يحملون صورا نمطية سلبية تجاه السود، كما أنهم ينظرون للآسيويين بشكل محايد، وغالبا ما ترتبط هذه النظرة بالأدوار الاجتماعية

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التي يلعبها الآسيويون في المجتمع الكويتي. كما أشارت النتائج أيضا إلى أن العوامل الثقافية والدينية قد أثرت بشكل واضح على التوجهات العرقية عند الأطفال، وشكلت سلوكياتهم المتوقعة وتفضيلاتهم الاجتماعية. تسلط نتائج هذه الدراسة الضوء على نقاط محورية ينبغي أن ينطلق منها المعلمون وصانعو السياسات التربوية والباحثون لتعزيز بيئات تعليمية شاملة ومتنوعة لجميع الأطفال. علاوة على ذلك، تساهم النتائج في تقديم تصور واضح حول كيفية تشكل الصور النمطية تجاه الأعراق المختلفة لدى الأطفال، وأهمية حرص المعلمين على تأهيل الأطفال منذ المراحل الدراسية المبكرة على تقبل واحترام التنوع الثقافي لدى أقرانهم ومعلميهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: رياض الأطفال؛ الصور النمطية؛ تقبل الأقران؛ تفضيلات الأطفال للمعلمين؛ التوجهات العرقية.

Introduction

An important aspect of child racial identity development is the identification and development of child racial and ethnic group preferences that can be observed already in infants (Mandalaywala et al., 2021). American preschoolers initiated play mostly with same-race children (MacNevin & Berman, 2020). A study conducted in a predominantly homogeneous Arab Gulf society with no apparent racial or ethnic differences obtained the same results (Ziadah, 2021). The Bronfenbrenner ecological systems approach suggests that kindergarten children are active learners who shape their individual development within their available environment.

Social identity theory suggests that children begin associating themselves with others by the age of three (Rasheed et al., 2020). Racial attitudes refer to individuals' beliefs, feelings, and pre-dispositions toward people based on race (Aboud, 2008; Raabe & Beelmann, 2011), manifested as stereotypes, prejudices, and biases that affect interpersonal interactions and societal structures (Aboud, 2008). Peer acceptance is the degree to which a child is socially accepted by their peers (Rubin et al., 2006). It is crucial for social development and affects a child's self-esteem, academic performance, and overall well-being (Nesdale & Flesser, 2001; Rubin et al., 2006). Teacher preferences refer to the tendencies of students to favor certain teachers, such as teaching style, personality, and perceived competence, among other factors (Dee, 2004; Roorda et al., 2011).

Racial stereotypes and attitudes generally affect educational outcomes, especially in western countries (Alba, 2005; Costa et al., 2021; Glock, 2016; Redding, 2019). Despite the international interest in the study of racial stereotypes and students' interactions with peers and teachers, little is known about how racial stereotypes affect kindergarteners' peer acceptance and teacher preference in Kuwait. Arab research has underutilized *Critical Race Theory* (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) and Social Identity Theory (Rasheed et al., 2020) in studying racial dynamics in education.

Research Problem and Questions

This research sought to fill this gap by investigating how racial stereotypes affect social interactions, peer acceptance, and teacher preferences among Kuwaiti kindergarten children. It aimed to explore children's attitudes and stereotypes toward different racial groups and their effects on peer acceptance and teacher preferences within a homogeneous environment. Based on the research gaps and problem statement, we aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Kuwaiti children perceive individuals from Asian, Black, and White racial groups?
2. How do children's racial stereotypes influence their acceptance of outgroup peers?
3. How do children's racial stereotypes influence their preferences for outgroup teachers?

Literature Review

First: Racial Stereotypes and Mechanisms

Stereotypes are generalized beliefs about individuals based on their membership in a particular group, often leading to assumptions that all group members share the same traits (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996). These can be explicit, involving conscious awareness, or implicit, operating unconsciously and influencing behaviors without awareness (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). In children, the development of racial stereotypes, formed through socialization processes and influenced by factors like family, media, societal norms, and peer pressure, begins at an early age (Ghanayim, 2022; Klapproth & Fischer, 2020; Levy et al., 2015).

In a study by Raabe and Beelmann (2011), they found that children aged (5-7) start to categorize people based on race. These early-formed stereotypes can significantly affect social perceptions, peer acceptance, and educational outcomes. For example, children with strong racial biases may prefer friends and teachers from their racial group, leading to the social exclusion of those who are different (Priest et al., 2014; Rutland et al., 2010). Promoting diverse and positive portrayals of different racial groups in media can help counteract negative stereotypes (Vittrup, 2018). Moreover, schools can implement programs that encourage intergroup contact and teach children about the value of diversity (Pahlke et al., 2012).

Second: Theories in Racial Stereotypes and Attitudinal Preferences

The *Implicit Bias Theory* illuminates how teachers' unconscious biases against students of different ethnicities affect children's peer acceptance and teacher preferences and lead to unequal treatment. However, implicit bias theory often emphasizes adult biases and focuses too little on how children learn and interpret them. Ghanayim (2022) used *Social Information Processing Theory* to study how children form stereotypes from social cues and information. This theory explains stereotype formation and cognitive mechanisms but neglects social and cultural influences, which are essential in diverse societies like Kuwait.

The *Stereotype Threat Theory* illustrates how fear of negative stereotypes affects behavior and performance. Kuwaiti children's response to internalized racial stereotypes might affect their interactions with peers and teachers of different races. The theory might miss the subtleties of young children's social interactions due to its focus on performance-related outcomes. However, Hitti and Killen (2015) argued that *Social Identity Theory* emphasizes the influence of group membership on outgroup attitudes and behaviors. It helps explain how Kuwaiti children's identity affects peer acceptance and teacher preferences. Despite its strengths, it can oversimplify identity formation, especially in multicultural settings.

Fundamental sociocultural frameworks, like *Critical Race Theory (CRT)* and *Multicultural Education Theory,* help contextualize racial dynamics in Kuwaiti kindergarten classrooms. According to Redding (2019), CRT challenges the structures and ideologies that perpetuate racial inequalities in education, making it a powerful tool for studying Kuwaiti children's racial stereotypes and preferences. *Multicultural Education Theory* promotes inclusive education that respects and incorporates diverse cultural perspectives. This theory is essential for understanding how Kuwaiti schools promote positive racial attitudes in children, although it sometimes fails to address deep-seated racial biases, focusing instead on cultural differences rather than social hierarchies.

Third: Formation of Racial Stereotypes in Children: Ecological Systems Theory

Social, cognitive, and environmental factors influence the formation of racial stereotypes in children. *Ecological Systems Theory*, proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), provides a framework to understand these influences, positing that multiple layers of a child's environment contribute to his/her development. At the microsystem level, family attitudes and behaviors play a critical role, as children often adopt the explicit and implicit biases of their parents (Aboud, 2008). Schools and peer interactions further shape these stereotypes, with children mimicking the racial attitudes of their peers (McGlothlin & Killen, 2010). The mesosystem highlights the interconnections between these immediate environments, suggesting that consistent exposure to inclusive or biased views in both family and school settings can reinforce children's racial attitudes. The exosystem includes broader influences, such as media with their stereotypical portrayals of racial groups (Castelli et al., 2008). The microsystem encompasses cultural and societal norms that shape children's understanding of race, with societal attitudes reflected in policies and cultural narratives influencing stereotype formation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This understanding underscores the importance of early interventions involving family, school, and media to promote inclusivity and reduce prejudice (Vittrup, 2018).

Fourth: Racial Stereotypes, Attitudes, and Peer Acceptance

Racial stereotypes significantly influence children's peer acceptance, often leading to social exclusion and marginalization of those from different racial backgrounds (Nesdale & Flesser, 2001; Nesdale et al., 2003). According to *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory*, the microsystem, which includes family and peer interactions, is a primary source of these stereotypes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Societal norms can promote homogeneity and exacerbate these biases, leading to negative psychosocial outcomes for ethnic minority children (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014; Leitner et al., 2016). Killen et al. (2016) showed that boys are more likely to exhibit explicit racial biases, whereas girls may express these biases more subtly due to different socialization within their ecological systems. Additionally, Nesdale et al. (2003) found that boys and girls differ in their peer group dynamics and responses to intergroup interactions, with boys showing stronger ingroup preferences and girls being more sensitive to social harmony and inclusivity. Creating inclusive environments that celebrate diversity across these ecological systems is crucial for fostering positive intergroup

attitudes and mitigating the adverse effects of racial bias (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Levy & Hughes, 2009).

According to Hitti and Killen (2015), shared interests, group norms, and stereotypes mediate ethnic peer group inclusivity. In their study, children's expectations of peer group inclusivity were closely tied to their peers' racial and ethnic identities, showing that stereotypes determine peer group acceptance. Glock (2016) reported that teachers' stereotypical expectations influence their judgments of students, indirectly affecting peer interactions. Additionally, social information processing and modern education shape children's racial attitudes (Alelaimat et al., 2022; Ghanayim, 2022). Societal norms shape kindergarten teachers' perceptions, which affect children's attitudes toward peers of different races and ethnicities in Jordan (Alelaimat et al., 2022). Promoting inclusivity and challenging racial biases through early interventions is important because peer acceptance patterns can reinforce stereotypes.

Fifth: Student Preferences and Teacher Performance

Student preferences for their teachers significantly influence both their academic performance and teachers' effectiveness. When students feel a connection with their teachers, their academic performance improves (Alshaikhi, 2021; Carrell et al., 2015; Roorda et al., 2011). Teachers who believe their students are biased against them may experience lower job satisfaction and motivation, which can affect their teaching (Dee, 2004). These biases stem from racial, ethnic, or cultural stereotypes, leading to a disconnect between students and teachers that undermines the educational process. The ecological systems theory posits that these interactions are influenced by broader social and cultural contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Interventions aimed at promoting diversity and inclusivity in the classroom can help mitigate these negative effects, fostering a more equitable and supportive educational environment (Gay, 2002).

According to Redding (2019), students' preference for racially or ethnically similar teachers reinforces racial divide in the classroom, resulting in segregated social groups and unequal educational experiences. Glock (2016) revealed that teachers' awareness of students' racial preferences changes their teaching performance, compromising diverse students' educational experience. Additionally, Ghanayim (2022) and Alelaimat et al. (2022) showed that social information processing and cultural norms affect students' views of multiracial teachers. According to Kunesh and Noltemeyer (2019), these dynamics can

worsen educational inequalities because teachers may unconsciously favor students who match their racial expectations, perpetuating classroom cycles of bias and discrimination.

Sixth: Education and Racial Dynamics in the Arab World

Family attitudes, influenced by historical and contemporary social norms, play a critical role in shaping children's racial attitudes (Aboud, 2008). Media representations, often reflect societal biases, further reinforce these stereotypes (Castelli et al., 2008). School and peer interactions also contribute to the development of racial attitudes, with children learning and internalizing the biases present in their immediate social environments (McGlothlin & Killen, 2010). Overall, addressing racial stereotypes in the Arab world requires a multifaceted approach that considers historical legacies, contemporary social structures, and the various ecological systems that influence children's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Alshaikhi (2021) explored Saudi early childhood teachers' perceptions of developing a diverse curriculum and found that cultural norms that marginalize certain racial groups make inclusivity difficult. According to Jaber (2019), Arab American students in the US face similar inclusion issues due to racial and ethnic biases, reflecting Arab students' challenges in diverse settings. Alelaimat et al. (2022) found that Jordanian teachers' perceptions and evaluation practices perpetuate racial and ethnic stereotypes, affecting children's social development and peer acceptance. Ghanayim (2022) in Israel found that mothers' views of the Jewish-Arab conflict influence children's stereotyping, social adjustment, and attitudes toward outgroup peers. Klapproth and Fischer (2020) showed that marginalized racial groups in the Arab context receive lower grades, reinforcing educational inequalities.

Methodology

Participants

In this qualitative research, we targeted 14 kindergarten children, 8 girls and 6 boys, with an average age of 4.9 years. All children identified ethnically as having *Middle Eastern* and *Caucasian* backgrounds, with skin tones ranging from light to tan. Characteristic features included black hair and eyes, with varying hair textures from smooth to wavy. To optimize participant enrollment, the school administrator selected the largest available

classroom in one of the public kindergartens in Kuwait. Efforts were made to ensure a racially homogeneous participant group to mitigate potential racial biases. This involved selecting a class with children having similar physical attributes, such as skin color, hair texture, and facial features, within the designated classroom. The number of children varied over the visits due to the absence.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred in three distinct phases over two months, each serving a unique purpose and employing specific procedures.

Phase 1: In-class participant observation. During this initial phase, our objectives were to introduce ourselves to the children and distribute consent forms to be completed by their parents during two visits to the same classroom spaced one week apart.

- ***First Visit:*** During the initial visit, we greeted the children and introduced ourselves as researchers from Kuwait University. Engaging in friendly discussions for approximately 10 minutes, we spoke with the children about the importance of maintaining a healthy diet and asked them to identify some healthy foods. The first class comprised nine children, 5 girls and 4 boys. Placing 27 bananas on the table, each adorned with a sticker depicting a joyful child (both boys and girls) from distinct racial groups *(Asian, Black, and White),* we instructed the children to approach and select their bananas. As the children formed a line to retrieve their bananas, we positioned ourselves nearby to observe their actions and record notes. Additionally, we distributed consent forms to the children, requesting their parents' signatures, and instructed them to return the completed forms the following day. The teacher agreed to collect the consent forms from the children on our behalf. We also gave her additional consent forms to be distributed to the absent children.
- ***Second Visit:*** A week later, we returned to the classroom for our second visit, where we once again greeted the children. We engaged in a 10-minute discussion with the class, focusing on the importance of personal hygiene and offering tips such as frequent handwashing, bathing, and regular teeth brushing. The second visit comprised ten children, 6 girls and 4 boys. Placing 30 small dental kits on the table, each containing a toothbrush and toothpaste and adorned with a sticker depicting a joyful child (both boys and girls) from distinct racial groups *(Asian, Black, and White)*.

The children again formed a line to collect their dental kits while we closely observed their interactions and made detailed observations. Using pictures to identify children's racial attitudes is a widely used method by researchers. For instance, Wilson (2014) found that using pictures and dolls represented evidence-based methods in determining children's racial attitudes.

Phase 2: Individual face-to-face interviews. Two weeks after the second visit, we conducted individual face-to-face interviews to investigate children's attitudes toward potential peers of varying racial backgrounds *(Asian, Black, and White)*.

- ***Interview 1: Attitudes Toward Potential Peers:*** We interviewed 11 children, 6 girls and 5 boys, over three days. Two children were absent, and one declined to participate. The interviews, lasting approximately 10 minutes each, were conducted in a private teachers' room, with the main author leading the discussions in the presence of the children's teacher, who remained silent throughout. To minimize gender biases and consider Kuwait's conservative social context, children were provided with three pictures of similar-age children (*White, Black, and Asian* boys or girls, depending on the child's gender), all exhibiting neutral facial expressions. Children were informed that these children attended kindergarten elsewhere. To assess befriending, children were told that they could select all pictures if desired, but for attribution-related questions, they were encouraged to choose only one child who they thought had the most positive or negative attributes. The authors ensured that children understand what each attribute word means. The questions posed to the children included:

1. Who would you like to befriend?
2. Why would you like to befriend these children?
3. Who would you not like to befriend?
4. Why would you not like to befriend these children?
5. Negative attributes: Identify who is mean, dirty, naughty, stupid, rude, poor, sick, ugly, sad, and lacks friends.
6. Positive attributes: Identify who is kind, clean, obedient, smart, polite, affluent, healthy, pretty, happy, and has many friends.

- ***Interview 2: Attitudes Toward Potential Teachers:*** We conducted the second set of interviews with 12 children, evenly split between genders, over three days. Two children were absent during their scheduled interviews. Each interview, lasting 10-15 minutes, took place in a private teachers' room, with the main author leading the discussions while the children's teacher remained silent. Given the prevalent female-centric nature of Kuwait's educational system, three female pictures representing diverse racial backgrounds *(White, Black, and Asian)* were provided to the children, with all individuals depicted wearing hijabs to prevent religious biases. Children were asked the following questions:

1. Who is your favorite teacher?
2. Why do you like this teacher?
3. Why don't you pick up other teachers?

Phase 3: Focus Groups. To delve deeper into children's racial stereotypes towards different racial groups, we conducted two short 15 to 20-minute focus groups with 12 children, 6 boys and 6 girls, two weeks after the conclusion of the second phase. Both were held on the same day in a designated classroom. Each author led a single focus group session, with teachers being passive participants. The discussions were audio-recorded for later analysis.

The children were shown images depicting families from White, Black, and Asian racial backgrounds dressed in casual attire. All families represented middle-class households and appeared content and financially equal. The children were then prompted to narrate a story about each family, covering aspects such as their identity, occupation, place of residence, spoken language, perceived differences, and any other relevant details. The specific questions posed to the children included:

1. Describe the story of this family: Who they are, what they do, where they live, what language they speak, any perceived differences, and so forth.
2. Which family would you like to befriend? Which family would you like to invite home? Which family would you like to visit at home?

Analysis Procedures

Phase One Documents: We tallied the number of children selecting each item (bananas and dental kits) and compiled the findings into tables in frequencies and percentages. Additionally, we summarized our observational notes, detailing the children's

actions during the phase. ***Phase Two Documents:*** This phase involved the collection of both numerical data and significant segments. We quantified children's responses to positive and negative attributes, tabulating frequencies and percentages. Regarding befriending specific children, we identified significant segments within the documents, categorized by racial groups.

Phase Three Documents: We transcribed audio recordings into electronic files and analyzed the content. Significant segments consisted of noteworthy words or phrases reflecting children's attitudes toward each racial group. These segments were organized to construct narratives for each family, as perceived by the children. ***Translation:*** As Arabic was the primary language of both the children and researchers, documents were initially transcribed in Arabic and later translated into English. To ensure accuracy, a colleague with expertise in the English language reviewed the translations, suggesting minor adjustments where necessary. ***Reliability:*** To enhance the reliability of our qualitative data, we employed audio recordings during focus group interviews. Additionally, both researchers participated in coding the documents, engaging in multiple rounds of data revision to ensure consistency and reliability over the two-month data collection period. ***Validity:*** Combining observations, individual interviews, and focus group discussions bolstered the validity of our findings. Consistency across these methods validated our conclusions.

Ethical Considerations

Our research adhered to strict ethical standards for conducting research with human subjects, particularly children**.** Before collecting data, approval was obtained from the school administration board after presenting a detailed proposal. Informed consent was then secured from parents, who were fully briefed on the research's purpose and procedures. Children were also asked for consent at the start of each session, and their right to withdraw was emphasized. Only first names were used to protect privacy, and a teacher supervised data collection. All identifying information was deleted, and research documents were securely stored to ensure confidentiality.

Authors' Positionality and Reflexivity

The authors are females and share the same race of the children in this research, which may have contributed to making the children feel comfortable with them and facilitated data collection, especially since all kindergarten teachers in Kuwait are females.

Furthermore, the authors believe that they do not hold any prejudice against different racial groups.

Results

Phase 1: Initial Observations and Participant Interactions

Choices of Bananas Based on the Pictures of Children from Different Racial Groups

Children stood in a line to select bananas adorned with stickers depicting children from various racial groups. Every child had ample time to choose a banana freely. Notably, children predominantly selected bananas based on their gender. Boys selected them quicker compared to girls, who showed more deliberation when selecting bananas with pictures of children from different racial groups. Interestingly, girls who chose bananas featuring white girl pictures expressed admiration towards those who chose Asian girl pictures. No girls chose bananas depicting Black children (see Table 1).

Table 1

Choices of Bananas Based on the Pictures of Children from Different Racial Groups

	White child sticker		Black child sticker		Asian child sticker	
Gender	≠	%	≠	%	≠	%
Boys	1	25	1	25	2	50
Girls	4	80	0	0	1	20
Total	**5**	**55.6**	**1**	**11.1**	**3**	**33.3**

Dental Kits with Pictures of Children from Different Racial Groups

Children exhibited greater enthusiasm towards the selection of dental kits compared to bananas. The dental kits were displayed on the same table as the bananas, easily visible from a distance of one meter. Each child had the opportunity to choose a dental kit with the picture they desired. Similar to the banana selection, children adhered to gender norms while choosing their dental kits. Boys appeared not as interested in the pictures and were less selective compared to girls, whereas girls displayed more selectivity and deliberation. Additionally, some girls encouraged others in line to choose dental kits featuring pictures of white girls, citing their perceived beauty. Table 2 presents a summary of the findings.

Table 2

Choices of Dental Kits Based on the Pictures of Children from Different Racial Groups

Gender	White child		Black child		Asian child	
	≠	%	≠	%	≠	%
Boys	1	25	2	50	1	25
Girls	4	66.7	0	0	2	33.3
Total	**5**	**50**	**2**	**20**	**3**	**30**

Phase Two: Attitudes towards Potential Peers and Teachers

To assess children's attitudes toward potential peers of different racial groups (Asian, Black, and White) and their preferences for teachers of various racial backgrounds, we conducted individual face-to-face interviews over several days.

Attitudes Towards Potential Peers: Peer Acceptance

Gender differences emerged in children's willingness to befriend children from different racial groups as shows in Table 3. In addition, Table 4 summarizes children's justifications for their befriending preferences.

Table 3

Children's Willingness to Befriend Children from Different Racial Groups

Interview question	*Participants*	*Responses*
Who would you like to befriend?	Girls (n= 6)	White girl (n = 6, 100%) Asian girl (n = 4, 66.7%)
	Boys (n= 5)	White boy (n = 1, 20%) Asian boy (n = 4, 80%) Black boy (n = 2, 40%)

Table 4

Children's Reasons for Befriending/Not Befriending a Specific Child

Gender of the participant	Reasons	White child	Black child	Asian Child
Boys	To befriend	Speak English, clean, smell good.	Strong, help in beating others, violent.	Smart, play video games, kind, clean.
	Not to befriend	girlish, weak, cowardly, not speak Arabic.	Smell bad, angry, to avoid bullying.	Coward, eat noodles, not defendant against others.
Girls	To befriend	Pretty, clean, proud, joyful.	None.	Pretty, clean, smart, kind.
	Not to befriend	Unreal.	Ugly, dirty, evil, scary, smell bad.	Small eyes.

Children were assigned positive attributes mostly to White children. They assigned negative attributes more frequently to the Black child. Table 5 presents a detailed breakdown of children's responses regarding positive attributes.

Table 5

Children's Assignment of Positive Attributes to Children Depicted in the Pictures

Gender	**Boys**			**Girls**		
Race	*Asian*	*Black*	*White*	*Asian*	*Black*	*White*
Positive attributes						
1. Kind	2	0	3	2	0	4
2. Clean	1	0	4	1	0	5
3. Obedient	2	0	3	2	1	3
4. Smart	4	0	1	3	0	3
5. Polite	2	0	3	3	0	3
6. Rich	1	0	4	1	0	5
7. Healthy	0	1	4	2	0	4
8. Pretty	2	0	3	1	0	5
9. Happy	1	0	4	2	0	4
10. Social	1	0	3	1	0	5
Frequency	**18**	**1**	**32**	**18**	**1**	**41**
Percentage	**36%**	**2%**	**64%**	**30%**	**1.7%**	**68.3%**

Table 6

A Comprehensive Overview of Children's Responses Regarding Negative Attributes

Gender	**Boys**			**Girls**		
Race	*Asian*	*Black*	*White*	*Asian*	*Black*	*White*
Negative attributes						
1. Mean	1	3	1	2	4	0
2. Dirty	1	4	0	1	5	0
3. Naughty	0	5	0	1	3	2
4. Stupid	0	4	1	0	6	0
5. Rude	1	3	1	0	5	1
6. Poor	2	3	0	3	3	0
7. Sick	2	3	0	2	3	1
8. Ugly	1	4	0	1	5	0
9. Sad	2	3	0	2	3	1
10. Lonely	0	4	1	1	5	0
Frequency	**10**	**36**	**4**	**13**	**42**	**5**
Percentage	**20%**	**72%**	**8%**	**21.7%**	**70%**	**8.3%**

The findings indicated that most children, irrespective of gender, assigned the highest number of positive attributes to the White child (n = 93, 84.5%), followed by the Asian child (n = 36, 32.7%). Conversely, the Black child was associated with the fewest positive attributes (n = 2, 1.8%). Furthermore, children assigned the highest number of negative attributes to the Black child (n = 78, 70.1%), while the Asian child fell in the middle of the range (n = 23, 20.9%), and the White child received the least negative attributes (n = 9, 8.2%).

Attitudes Towards Potential Teachers: Teacher Preference

We asked children to pick up only one favorite teacher because, in Kuwait, only one principal teacher is assigned to each kindergarten classroom. Children cited reasons for liking/disliking specific teachers (Table 7).

Table 7

Children's Justifications for Liking/Disliking Specific Teachers

Gender	Reasons	White teacher	Black teacher	Asian teacher
Boys	Liking	Pretty, speak English, clean.	None.	Kind, caring, and knows Arabic.
	Disliking	Doesn't know Arabic, she is not a Muslim.	Scary, beats, angry.	Not pretty and sleeps a lot.
Girls	Liking	Pretty, soft voice, kind, angel-like.	None.	Caring, pretty, smells good, gentle.
	Disliking	Unreal doesn't speak Arabic.	Bad mouth, scary, evil-like, punisher.	Thief, bad mouth.

Regardless of gender, children uniformly avoided selecting the Black teacher. Girls predominantly chose the White teacher (n = 4, 66.7%), while boys mostly chose the Asian teacher (n = 4, 66.7%).

Phase Three: Exploration of Racial Stereotypes Through Narrative Analysis

Children were divided into two mixed-gender groups of six, with one group remaining inside the classroom and the other moving to a nearby playground with the assistant teacher. We initiated the session by presenting the Asian family poster to the children in the classroom and prompting them to narrate a story about this family. Children had seven minutes to elaborate on their narrative, with a timer set accordingly. The same procedure was followed for the Black and White family posters. Children displayed a more

negative tone when discussing the Black family, showing disinterest in the Asian family. When discussing the White family, children appeared more composed, with girls providing more detailed narratives compared to boys. Table 8 summarizes the children's stories.

Table 8

Children's Stories About Families from Different Racial Backgrounds

The family	Examples of children's quotes	Authors' interpretation
Asian	C1*: "This is a poor Filipino family". C2: "They live in a tiny house near the sea". C3: "They eat fish and noodles". C4: "They look friendly and not Muslim." C5: "they are clean and smell good".	This impoverished Asian family resides in modest dwellings near the sea, conversing in English. They are consuming noodles and fish. The boy does karate. They are non-Muslim and kind. The father is a teacher, and the mother is a homemaker. The children seem intelligent. Their hair is fragrant. The household is clean. The girl is cute, and the mother is a nurse. Additionally, the family has small eyes due to excessive sleep.
Black	C1: "They look dark and evil". S2: "they live alone in the African dissert and attack others". C3: "The kids appear to be foolish, do not go to school, and spend a lot of their days playing outside". C4: "the mother beats her children" C5: "They are sinners".	The Black family is portrayed negatively as evil individuals with burnt skin residing in a hot climate. They consume predatory animals; they are tall and aggressive. The family is assumed to live in Africa, isolated and impoverished, exhibiting violent behavior. The children look unintelligent and do not attend school, playing outside extensively. The father works as a truck driver, while the mother is physically abusive. The family is associated with criminal activities, including theft and kidnapping.
White	C1: "they are white like angels". C2: "they have blue eyes like my mom". C3: "The family is rich, so their kids are smart." C4: "they are dolls", C5: "they cure people".	The White family is idealized, perceived as angelic beings originating from heaven. They wear colored lenses, have dyed hair, and speak English. The family is affluent, with intelligent children. The father is a doctor, possibly a teacher, while the mother is soft-spoken. They own dogs, consume pork, and possess unique features, like cat eyes. The family is associated with snow-clad environments and an otherworldly existence.

C* stands for a participating child

Discussion and Implications

This study's findings underscore the significant influence of social and cultural factors on Kuwaiti children's perceptions of different racial groups. Consistent with previous research,

children assigned positive attributes predominantly to individuals portrayed as White (Aboud, 2008; Castelli et al., 2008). This preference mirrors broader societal norms and cultural representations that often idealize lighter skin tones (Hunter, 2007). Children stereotyped Asian individuals as domestic workers and gave Black individuals negative traits, such as aggression and poverty, reflecting historical and contemporary patterns of racial stratification in the Arab world influenced by colonialism and migrant labor (Alba, 2005; Jureidini, 2003).

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) examines multiple layers of influence on children's racial attitudes. Interestingly, in phases 1 and 2 of data collection, there was only one incidence of a male child choosing to befriend a White boy, picking a banana and selecting a dental kit with a White boy. This can be explained by the prevalent sociocultural context in the Kuwaiti society where manhood is often associated with roughness and sharp facial features. This may indicate that the image of the White boy is not compatible with the social perception of Kuwaiti boys or men. However, further research is encouraged to understand the interaction between race and gender.

Furthermore, gender differences in the formation and expression of racial stereotypes were noted, with boys showing more explicit biases and girls exhibiting more subtle forms of bias (Killen et al., 2007). This finding is consistent with Nesdale et al. (2003), who found that boys are more likely to display strong ingroup preferences, while girls are more concerned with social harmony and inclusivity.

During the third stage of the research, children's responses reflected deeper layers of social and cultural conditioning. Many children described individuals from different racial groups using terms and concepts likely influenced by their family and religious backgrounds. For instance, descriptions of Asian individuals as domestic workers and Black individuals with negative traits may be based on their observations at home or community attitudes. In Kuwaiti society, domestic workers are predominantly from Asian countries (Jarallah, 2009). Religious teachings and family discussions can play a significant role in children's responses. Islamic teachings emphasizing equality and respect for all people may contrast with observed societal behaviors, leading to internal conflicts in children's attitudes. Families that discuss and practice these teachings more explicitly might raise children with more inclusive attitudes.

These findings highlight the importance of implementing interventions at multiple levels to promote inclusion and challenge entrenched biases in these systems. They underscore the importance of early interventions to combat racial stereotypes, emphasizing the need for inclusive educational practices and diverse media representations (Vittrup 2018; Pahlke et al. 2012). Practical applications of this research include the development of educational programs that promote diversity and inclusivity within the classroom. These programs should involve activities that encourage intergroup contact and teach children about the value of diversity. Schools can also provide training for teachers on how to address and mitigate racial biases, fostering a more inclusive environment that promotes positive intergroup interactions. Media portrayals should promote diverse and positive representations of all racial groups to counteract negative stereotypes (Vittrup, 2018). Policymakers can implement policies that promote diversity and inclusivity in education and media. This research contributes to the limited literature on racial stereotypes in the Arab world, particularly within Kuwait, providing valuable insights for educators and policymakers aiming to promote diversity and inclusion in kindergarten settings. Understanding the mechanisms underlying the formation of racial biases in children is crucial for promoting inclusivity and reducing discrimination in educational settings.

Conclusion

This research provided significant insights into the effects of racial stereotypes on peer acceptance and teacher preference among Kuwaiti kindergarten children within a culturally homogeneous environment. The findings revealed that children showed positive attitudes towards White individuals and negative stereotypes towards Black individuals. Asian individuals were perceived neutrally and often associated with domestic roles. Cultural and religious context, which shapes children's social behaviors and perceptions from an early age, influenced these preferences. Moreover, observing children’s interactions with each other as well as with their teacher might be interpreted as preference for same-race peers and teachers. However, as this claim cannot be verified by observation alone, further research is suggested.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory highlights the multifaceted influences on children's racial attitudes, encompassing family, school, media, and broader societal norms. Promoting diversity and inclusivity within educational settings can mitigate negative

stereotypes, fostering a more equitable environment that encourages positive social interactions among all racial groups.

The research emphasizes the role of educational policies and practices in shaping children's racial attitudes. By implementing inclusive curricula and encouraging intergroup contact, educators can play a crucial role in reducing racial biases. The findings contribute to the broader understanding of the development of racial stereotypes in young children.

Limitations and future directions

This research has been conducted by female researchers who share the same race of the children. However, we are not sure if the researchers had been of different gender and/or race would have changed the results, which calls for considering this limitation in future research. Moreover, replicating the procedures by a researcher from a different race may eliminate any potential implicit/explicit biases the authors *may* hold against different racial groups. Future research should expand on these findings by exploring similar dynamics in other culturally homogeneous societies and investigating the long-term effects of early racial biases on social development. Such studies are vital for developing comprehensive strategies to promote racial equity and inclusivity in early childhood education globally.

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