

Multiracial children often identified as black

September 9 2015, by Jared Wadley

For black-white multiracial children, how others perceive them may be inconsistent with how they perceive themselves.

This includes perceptions by children and adults, according to a new University of Michigan study.

The researchers examined how 387 Midwest children (4-13 years) and adults categorized multiracial children as black, [white](#) or as not wholly black or wholly white.

Multiracial children were shown either with their parents—one black parent and one white parent—or without them.

When it was clear that multiracial children had one black parent and one white parent, [older children](#) and adults categorized them as not wholly black or wholly white, said Steven Roberts, a U-M doctoral student in psychology and the study's lead author.

However, white and black adults still considered multiracial children as black more often than as white, showing that white adults excluded multiracial children from their racial in-group. Meanwhile, black adults included multiracial children within their racial in-group.

Child participants showed a different pattern. When multiracial children were shown with their parents, children did not see them as more black or more white. However, when multiracial children were shown without their parents, white children perceived them as more black, whereas

[black children](#) again did not see them as more black or more white.

"Importantly, [white children](#) from predominantly white contexts were especially likely to categorize multiracial children as black, whereas black children from predominantly white contexts were especially likely to categorize multiracial children as white," Roberts said.

These findings suggest that by adulthood, people think of multiracial children as black because of their black parentage, whereas during childhood, people do so because of physical appearances and experiences with group contact. That is, [adults](#) believe that parentage determines identity, whereas children believe that physical appearance and contexts do.

"These developmental differences are important for parents to know—especially parents of multiracial children," said Roberts, who authored the study with Susan Gelman, a professor of psychology and linguistics.

"They show that how multiracial children are perceived depends on where they are, who they interact with and what they look like. Helping children understand this will help them understand why others may not see them the way they see themselves."

When multiracial children are misidentified—or placed in an incorrect category—it can affect their self-esteem, motivation and ability to form quality social relationships, Roberts said.

"For these reasons, self-identified multiracial people appreciate when others see them as multiracial, rather than as [black](#) or as white," he said.

The findings appear in *Child Development*.

More information: "Do Children See in Black and White? Children's and Adults' Categorizations of Multiracial Individuals." *Child Development*. doi: 10.1111/cdev.12410

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