

Black Pete through the Eyes of Dutch Children

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Implicit Racial Bias in Black Pete Study

Posted by **vanijzen** on **14 Sep 2016 at 08:27 GMT**

In the Netherlands Black Pete is the black assistant of the white Dutch Santa Claus ('Sinterklaas') who visits children's homes on December 5 and delivers presents. In the multi-ethnic society of the contemporary Netherlands Black Pete has become a hotly debated figure. A large number of non-White Dutch citizens want to change or abolish Black Pete as representative of a colonial past who triggers racist feelings because of his stereotypic face, his submissive attitude and sometimes clumsy behaviour.

The study by Mesman and colleagues, titled 'Black Pete through the Eyes of Dutch Children' (PLoS ONE 11(6): e0157511. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0157511) aims to contribute some scientific facts to this social debate by assessing children's attitudes toward Black Pete. Mesman and colleagues found that Dutch children view Black Pete as more similar to a clown than to a black person, and that they have a very positive perception of his role and personality. The implication is that from the children's perspective Black Pete is not a racial stereotype and need not be abolished for that reason.

However, the study has some weaknesses and implicit biases.

First, the measures used have limited validity and unknown reliability. The most important measure requires children to compare figures from four categories: Black Petes, clowns, black persons, and white persons. Black Petes are rated very favorably, whereas black persons are rated least favorably. But how favorably a representative of each of these categories is rated relative to the others depends on the categories: with more or different categories children's

comparisons will of course change. This is not a trivial issue because the categories of black and white persons are just abstract classes, not black physicians or black professors, who might have been seen as much more appealing because their identity is not exhausted by the color of their skin but defined by more important features such as their profession.

Second, the large majority of the 201 children who were asked about their perception of Black Pete were white or 'with a little pigmentation' (total 93%), 4.5% of the children were 'a bit brown', and only one child was 'black' (see dataset supplemented to the paper <https://figshare.com/s/6f...>). Only 6% of the children lived in a neighborhood of mixed ethnicities --implying that 94% lived in white wealthy middle- to upper-class neighborhoods in the Netherlands. It is a convenience sample collected in a period of three weeks. This overwhelmingly white sample cannot legitimately address the question of Black Pete as a racial stereotype that can lead to ethnic discrimination of black children during the weeks before and after December 5. In order to create sufficiently large groups for statistical analyses the authors put children 'with a little pigmentation', or 'a bit brown' in the same category as the one 'black' child and they labeled this category as 'non-white'. This surely illustrates how pervasive the implicit bias of color-blindness still is in developmental research.

White children living in white neighborhoods and receiving nice presents from Black Pete naturally consider him favorably. They think he is funny, he is an important helper of the old bishop Sinterklaas ('Santa Claus'), and of course most significantly they think he is truly generous because he brings them beautiful presents. What it means for a black child from a former Dutch colony or a colored refugee child from a Muslim family who may not celebrate Sinterklaas to have an identical skin color as Black Pete cannot emerge from this highly selected sample. How it feels to be identified with a submissive and clumsy stereotype remains invisible in the present study. In fact, its implicit bias is comparable to a study on the (dis-)advantages of prostitution in which only the 'customers' and not the prostitutes are interviewed.

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No competing interests declared.

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RE: Implicit Racial Bias in Black Pete Study

jmesman replied to **vanijzen** on **14 Sep 2016 at 10:51 GMT**

The authors are happy to report that the second part of this study is well under way, and that this part includes exclusively children with a dark skin color. So both perspectives are definitely integral parts of the larger project, but for practical reasons were split into two waves of data collection.

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No competing interests declared.

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