

Racial diversity and racial representation in U.S. children's books

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Abstract

It is well accepted in developmental and cognitive science that children represent the structure of their environment. This skill is generally useful, one that allows children to acquire the language(s) to which they are exposed, learn social rules, or represent relevant categories. But could this skill also have pernicious effects? Indeed, contemporary theories argue that children's racial biases emerge from being exposed to racial inequalities in their environment. Therefore, understanding – and ultimately interrupting – the development of racial biases requires better understanding the sources in young children's environment that perpetuate racial inequalities so that they can be corrected. Here we focus on a common aspect of children's environment – children's books – and document two features of how racial groups are depicted in U.S. children's books: the racial diversity (frequency) and racial representation (themes) in U.S. children's picture books. Through a meta-analysis (Study 1) and an information-theory analysis of an existing book collection (Study 2), we show that characters from minoritized racial backgrounds are not only numerically underrepresented in U.S. children's books, but there are also meaningful differences in the themes that are more likely to be associated with different racial groups. We discuss the implications of these results for developing theories of bias development that are grounded on real-world structure and for designing effective bias reduction approaches in childhood.