

INVESTIGATING THE RELATIVE SALIENCE OF RACE, SEX, AND FACIAL  
EXPRESSIONS OF EMOTION AMONG PRESCHOOLERS: INTRODUCING A NEW  
FACIAL CATEGORIZATION TASK

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APPROVAL

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

INVESTIGATING THE RELATIVE SALIENCE OF RACE, SEX, AND FACIAL EXPRESSIONS OF EMOTION AMONG PRESCHOOLERS: INTRODUCING A NEW FACIAL CATEGORIZATION TASK

presented by James A. Larsen,

a candidate for the degree of master of science,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....                        | ii |
| LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....                   | v  |
| ABSTRACT.....                                | vi |
| CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....                 | 1  |
| CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....            | 4  |
| Social Categorization During Preschool.....  | 4  |
| Towards a Competing Facial Stimuli Task..... | 8  |
| The Current Study.....                       | 11 |
| Research Questions.....                      | 11 |
| Hypotheses.....                              | 12 |
| CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY.....                  | 13 |
| Method.....                                  | 13 |
| Sampling and Participants.....               | 13 |
| Procedure and Measures.....                  | 14 |
| Overview.....                                | 14 |
| Choose-A-Picture Task.....                   | 14 |
| Demographic Information.....                 | 16 |
| Outcome Measures.....                        | 17 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| CHAPTER 4: RESULTS.....                | 18 |
| Data Analysis Overview .....           | 18 |
| Random and Non-Random Selection.....   | 18 |
| Assessing Relative Salience.....       | 20 |
| Predictors of Stimuli Preferences..... | 22 |
| CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....             | 24 |
| REFERENCES .....                       | 29 |

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

| Table   | Page |
|---|------|
| 1. Table 1. Proportion of Non-Random Selection Patterns by Condition and Instruction Type.....                                | 33   |
| 2. Table 2. Number and Percentage of Participants Selecting Pictures Based on Emotion Expression, Sex, Race, and “Other”..... | 34   |
| 3. Table 3. Predictors’ Contributions in the Multinomial Logistic Regression by Condition.....                                | 35   |
| Figure  | Page |
| 1. Figure 1. Example Items for Each Condition .....   | 36   |

## ABSTRACT

The present study was used to explore the relative salience of sex, race, and emotion expression among preschoolers using an author-developed facial categorization task. Forty-one children between the ages of 2.76 and 5.45 years ( $M$ -age = 4.09 years) completed the *Choose-A-Picture* task (CAP). Three conditions were created for the CAP to assess the relative salience of selected facial features using a competing stimuli approach: *Emotion Expression vs. Sex*, *Emotion Expression vs. Race*, and *Race vs. Sex*. In addition, two versions of the task were tested to investigate the influence of researcher instructions on children's categorization behaviors. The task successfully identified systematic (non-random) patterns of categorization for roughly 75% of preschoolers. Sex was the least salient facial characteristic, while race and emotion expression appeared to be of higher and relatively equal salience. Further elaboration of study findings and their implications are discussed.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Social categorization is the learned process of classifying people into groups based on perceptually-distinct features (Hogg, 2001). It is through this process that people are able to understand and make meaning of the social world. While it is well documented that, from a young age, children develop a number of patterned social categorization tendencies (Caron, Caron, & Myers, 1985; Chael & Rutherford, 2011; Widen & Russell, 2008), empirical research has focused primarily on single-characteristic (e.g., facial emotion expressions) differentiation, such as distinguishing between happy and sad faces. While this area of research has illuminated important dimensions of early childhood categorization, it provides a fragmented understanding of the overall process in context. Children's real-world social categorization does not take place in a one-dimensional setting; the people they see are characterized by several features that vary from person to person (e.g., happy/sad, boy/girl, Black/White, young/old). Research designed to explore social categorization in the presence of competing stimuli (e.g., sex vs. race) will provide further understanding of the overall process in context for at least two reasons.

First, the competing stimuli approach will provide a situation in which the relative salience of social features across contexts can be assessed. When facial features are studied in isolation, it is difficult to make reliable claims about the importance of specific social characteristics in the categorization process. It is possible that young children develop unique patterns of categorization across various facial features. In other words, young children might focus on one salient facial feature across situations or develop context-specific categorization behaviors for several facial features. For example,

children who depend on sex to categorize individuals in a racially-homogenous setting might either continue to categorize on the basis of sex in racially-diverse settings or shift their categorization attention to other facial features (e.g., race, facial emotion expression).

Second, a task that can adequately capture children's categorization tendencies when presented with competing stimuli increases the external validity of this area of study. According to recent work, children as young as four years of age begin to process human faces in a holistic manner (de Heering, Houthuys, & Rossion, 2007). That is to say, when children interact with and observe others, they do not experience or perceive their facial characteristics in isolation. Instead, young children process distinctive facial features (e.g., skin tone, physiognomy, emotion expression) simultaneously to create a comprehensive representation. Giving children the opportunity to demonstrate categorization behaviors in the presence of competing stimuli should allow researchers to make generalizable claims about the nature of these facial representations and the ways young children make sense of their social environments.

Similarly, the competing stimuli framework should increase applicability of research findings to real-world settings. A deeper understanding of the relative salience of social information in context will provide useful insights for adults invested in lives of young children to better understand the cognitive processes taking place as young children organize and utilize social information. Such understanding of these categorization processes should help adults promote positive social development of preschoolers. For example, if research can identify for whom and under what circumstances race or sex is the most salient facial stimulus, parents and childcare

professionals can maximize the positive impact of environments, interactions, and experiences intended to promote positive associations towards people of various social groups.

The current study used an author-developed task to explore the relative salience of social categories during the preschool years by having children select one of three pictures of real children's faces characterized by three competing stimuli: *sex* (boy, girl), *facial emotion expression* (happy, sad), and *race* (Black, White). Further, the current study was used to investigate how child-level characteristics (i.e., age, sex, race/ethnicity) and situational factors (i.e., spontaneous categorization vs. externally imposed categorization) relate to early social categorization behaviors. Detailed justification for the competing stimuli approach and the specific social characteristics chosen for this exploratory study is presented in the following sections.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

A human face contains an incredible amount of social information. From the earliest moments of life, people seem particularly drawn to faces above and beyond other salient visual stimuli (Valenza, Simion, Cassia, & Carlo, 1996). Infant research has identified facial preferences on the basis of familiarity (Bartrip & Morton, 2001), attractiveness (Slater, Von der Schulenburg, Brown, Badenoch, Butterworth, Parsons, & Samuels, 1998), emotion expression (LaBarbera, Izard, Vietze, & Parisi, 1976), sex (Quinn, Yahr, Kuhn, Slater, & Pascalis, 2002), race (Kelly, Quinn, Slater, Lee, Ge, & Pascalis, 2007), and other physical characteristics. These early preferences are evidence of rudimentary forms of facial categorization that serve as a foundation for later development. These findings are included to briefly highlight that as children transition into preschool they already possess a number of social categorization competencies.

### **Social Categorization During Preschool**

During the preschool years, children continue to use information extracted from faces as a means for social categorization. Among the most commonly studied facial characteristics used in children's categorization is emotion expression (Calder, Young, Perrett, Etcoff, & Rowland, 1996; Chael & Rutherford, 2011; Pollak & Kistler, 2002; Widen & Russell, 2008). Chael and Rutherford (2011) designed a study to explore whether 3.5-year-olds were more likely to detect within- or between-category differences in facial emotion expression. The researchers used a set of computer-generated faces to create a continuum of happy and sad facial expressions varying in terms of emotional intensity. Participants were shown two pictures at a time and were asked to explain if the faces "felt the same" or "felt different." The study findings indicated 3.5-year-olds tended

to state within-category faces (e.g., two faces with varying intensities of sad) “felt the same” and that between-category faces (e.g., one happy face, one sad face) “felt different.”

This finding suggests young children focus more on between- as opposed to within-category differences during the categorization of facial emotion expressions. However, it is possible the verbal criteria (i.e., “same” or “different”) guided children’s categorizations in a way that is not representative of spontaneous categorization (i.e., categorization without direct instruction indicating how to categorize). Another option is to simply present facial stimuli and observe if and how children categorize them without explicitly instructing them to do so. In this spontaneous categorization approach, experimenters might capture a unique and more authentic form of social categorization. The current study addresses this consideration by including two versions of the task to examine spontaneous and externally imposed categorization.

Children’s use of sex as a criterion for facial categorization is also well documented. Children as young as two years old can successfully classify pictures using common gender labels such as “girl” and “boy” (Weinraub et al., 1984) and by three years old, children can consistently identify their own sex and the sex of others (Thompson, 1975). While some research suggests young children rely heavily on cultural cues (e.g., hair length) to accurately categorize on the basis of sex (Thompson & Bentler, 1971), others argue humans can perform these categorizations without such cues by their first birthday (Leinbach & Fagot, 1993). Further, Wild et al. (2000) demonstrated children as young as seven years old can detect structural differences between faces of men and women. Collectively, it seems apparent that young children are remarkably

perceptive of sex categories, which some argue are among the most salient characteristics gleaned from faces (McGraw, Durm, & Durnam, 1988).

Marsha Weinraub and her colleagues (1984) explored gender labeling in a sample of 71 children between the ages of 24 and 38 months. Two types of gender labeling tasks were used: one verbal and one non-verbal. In the non-verbal task, children were asked to sort eight (presumably real, though not overtly stated in the report) pictures of adult men, adult women, boys, and girls (two of each) into one of two boxes. The experimenter placed one exemplar picture of a girl/woman on one box and one exemplar picture of a boy/man on the other box. S/he then explained to the participant one was “for men and boys” and the other was “for ladies and girls.” The experimenter showed the children one of eight pictures at a time and instructed them to “put it in the box where it goes.”

In the verbal task, children were shown the same eight pictures and were asked “Who is this? What type of person is this?” Any common gender label (e.g., “girl” or “mom”) was considered an acceptable response. Children were scored as successful in each task if seven out of eight pictures were sorted/labeled correctly. Three age groups were compared in the analyses: 24 to 27.5 months, 29 to 33 months, and 34 to 38 months. The majority of children could successfully assign verbal labels to pictures irrespective of age. Interestingly, while some children in each age group could categorize pictures non-verbally, the oldest group was the only one in which the majority of children accurately sorted pictures non-verbally. This finding suggests an increase in non-verbal sex categorization skills over the third and fourth years of life.

In addition to facial emotion expression and sex, race is also an important social characteristic used in children’s categorizations during the early childhood years.

Preschool-age children develop a heightened awareness of race categories (Aboud, 1988). Some research has shown young children rely heavily on physiognomy (e.g., hair texture) in the formation of race categories (Sorce, 1979), while others believe skin color is of particular importance in children's understanding of race (Balas, Peissig, & Moulson, 2015; Dunham, Stepanova, Dotsch, & Todorov, 2015). In both cases, children can clearly perceive visually-distinct racial features and use them in their categorizations of others.

For example, Dunham et al. (2015) conducted a study with 76 children between 4 and 9 years old ( $M = 6.9$  years) and 54 adults to explore the relative importance of skin color and physiognomy in children's and adults' racial categorizations. For this review, I will focus only on the child version of the task. Fifty computer-generated pictures of faces were used, which were representative of two continua: one characterized by equal interval changes in skin color (from light to dark) and the other characterized by comparable alterations in physiognomy (from prototypically Eurocentric to prototypically Afrocentric features). One prototypical White face and one prototypical Black face were displayed on either side of a computer screen as reference points. Participants were shown one of fifty pictures at a time and instructed to place the pictures "where they belong" on a line from one reference picture to the other.

Prior to completing the task, children were coached on where to place pictures on the basis of how close they were to "perfect matches" with one of the two reference pictures. The authors found children used skin color as a sorting criterion far more than physiognomy with only slightly higher use of physiognomy among older children. The use of Eurocentric and Afrocentric features to categorize faces was virtually absent among children who had not yet entered elementary school (i.e., preschoolers; Dunham et

al., 2015). Although this distinction is not the topic of inquiry in the current study, it is interesting to note preschoolers will categorize faces within a fairly wide range of skin colors as belonging to the same group, regardless of structural differences.

### **Towards a Competing Facial Stimuli Task**

Much of the reviewed childhood categorization literature has at least two things in common. First, there is a tendency to explore young children's capacity to categorize faces by isolating specific facial characteristics (e.g., emotion expressions) while controlling for all others (e.g., sex, race, age). This body of literature has provided invaluable insights as to when children can categorize by the given characteristic, but it says little about how they cognitively organize these characteristics and use them in ecologically-valid contexts. It seems the next logical step in expanding this literature is to develop studies to explore how children use multiple facial characteristics simultaneously presented (i.e., on a single face) in their categorizations (Pauker, Williams, & Steele, 2016). One of the primary goals of the current study is to introduce a new measurement tool that assesses facial categorization of simultaneously competing characteristics.

Second, there is a tendency in this literature to use computer-generated or cartoon faces, although there are exceptions (Thompson, 1975; McGraw et al., 1988). The rationale for artificial faces is to minimize the risk of incidental differences between faces having unintentional influences on children's categorizations. However, while there are clear advantages to this methodological choice, there are also disadvantages. Children are capable of differentiating animate and inanimate objects from a very young age (Gelman & Spelke, 1983) and recent research has shown that typically-developing children do not process cartoon faces and pictures of real faces in the same manner (Rosset et al., 2010).

Further, artificial pictures often accentuate categorical differences beyond what children are likely to experience in their day-to-day lives (Dunham et al., 2015), which in and of itself may invalidate their use for the same reason they are often used (i.e., children may select features because of the emphasis in the artificial face, which would invalidate the findings). Because of these things, it should not be assumed the ways children distinguish artificial faces are the same ways they distinguish real faces.

It is not unreasonable to suspect that pictures of real faces might have too much incidental variation potentially influencing children's categorization behaviors. For example, the use of real pictures makes it difficult to account for subtle differences in characteristics with clear continua, such as skin color (light brown, dark brown, darker brown) or facial emotion expression (very sad, sad, somewhat sad). That said, there are theoretical bases and empirical evidence from the field of categorical perception to suggest these differences might be inconsequential. Research in the field of categorical perception provides a useful model for understanding the cognitive processes involved in sorting information from the world based on the interaction between advanced conceptual knowledge and the inborn human perceptual system (Goldstone & Hendrickson, 2010).

Categorical perception explains why people tend to process information more efficiently when stimuli are conceptually distinct (e.g., happy facial expression vs. sad facial expression) compared to stimuli characterized by perceptually subtle within-category differences (e.g., varying gradients of happy facial expressions). Indeed, there is considerable evidence to suggest people learn to collapse minute, within-category differences into a single category, while conceptually separating between-category differences (Harnad, 2003). The categorical perception phenomenon has been observed in

studies exploring facial expressions of emotion (Calder et al., 1996; Chael & Rutherford, 2011; Etkoff & Magee, 1992; Pollak & Kistler, 2002), race (Levin & Angelone, 2002), and sex (Bülthoff & Newell, 2004), among other social characteristics. Altogether, these findings in addition to the clear ecological benefits resulted in the decision to use pictures of real faces in the current study.

To the best of my knowledge, there has been only one peer-reviewed publication in the last thirty years that has attempted to explore the relative saliency of various facial features among preschoolers using pictures of real faces. McGraw, Durm, and Durnam (1988) conducted a study with 69 children between the ages of 2.83 and 6.78 years ( $M = 4.62$  years) to explore the ways young children described photographs that varied on age (young, old), sex (male, female), race (Black, White), and the presence or absence of glasses. To assess the relative salience of these four characteristics, the researchers presented pairs of “maximally contrasted” (p. 253) photographs to children. For example, a picture of a young White girl with glasses would be paired with an old Black man without glasses. For every picture pair, one of the photographs was denoted by a star and children were asked “Which picture has the star?”

The authors found significant evidence in support of a “salience hierarchy” (p. 263) with sex as most salient followed by race, age, and finally glass wearing. While a compelling finding, it is possible the methodology used in the study highlights only one dimension of categorization behavior. That is, by asking children to use a verbal label to describe the photographs, the authors may have unintentionally restricted the responses children were able to provide. It is plausible that young children are more familiar with the verbal labels for sex groups compared to other features. For example, while

preschoolers frequently and accurately use sex labels (Zosuls et al., 2009), they may not have readily available access to verbal labels for facial emotion expressions and therefore may not freely produce these labels (Widen & Russell, 2003). To avoid this limitation, children in the current study will not be required to articulate category labels verbally. Instead, they will be asked to select a response by pointing to a picture.

### **The Current Study**

The current study builds upon early childhood categorization literature by investigating the relative salience of facial stimuli and examining how preschool children respond to facial categorization features when presented simultaneously and in competition. Additionally, I explored the influence of adult instruction to "choose the one that's most different" on changes in how children select pictures based on facial features of real faces compared to spontaneous selection of pictures (i.e., "choose one").

### **Research Questions**

An author-created task was developed (See Method for more details) in order to address the three central questions of this study: (a) Can a computerized picture selection task using photographs of real faces identify non-random, category-based selection patterns? (b) If so, what is the relative salience of race, sex, and emotion expression as categories used in preschoolers' processing of faces? (c) Are there individual and situational factors that help explain and predict the relative salience of these facial features? The following hypotheses are suggested to provide a framework for interpreting findings.

## **Hypotheses**

The first research question highlights two of this study's unique characteristics. First, pictures of real faces are utilized in the task. Although this decision may be a point of contention for some (see previous discussion in Literature Review), detection of salient social categories using real photographs has been reliably achieved in previous work (Thompson, 1975; McGraw et al., 1988). Second, the author-created task used in this study requires only that children select pictures of faces, rather than physically sorting them or manipulating them in some other manner. This methodological decision was purposefully made to increase usability of the task by minimizing verbal instruction and comprehension by the young participants. I hypothesize that through this task children will reveal non-random patterns of picture selections by selecting pictures within-condition based primarily (i.e., at a rate above chance) on competing stimuli.

To address the second and third research questions, two competing hypotheses are offered: (a) a generalized salience hierarchy (GSH) hypothesis and (b) a multiple salience hierarchy (MSH) hypothesis. The GSH hypothesis suggests the existence of an invariant, universal rank order of facial stimuli salience among preschoolers. Support for this hypothesis will come from data indicating the same clear and discernable rank order of social stimuli across children (i.e., all participants show the same rank order of stimuli) regardless of instructions given by the experimenter. The MSH hypothesis suggests there may be several distinct hierarchies attributable to sample demographics that will differ by task demands (i.e., type of adult instruction). Support for this hypothesis will come from data revealing distinct hierarchies for sub-groups of the sample (e.g., boys vs. girls) or between the two versions of adult instruction.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### **Method**

#### **Sampling and Participants**

A convenience sample of 44 preschoolers (46% female) between the ages of 2.76 and 5.45 years (*M*-age = 4.09 years) was recruited from three mixed-aged preschool classrooms in a university-affiliated childcare provider located in the Midwest. Parent consent forms were distributed through children's classroom folders with permission from the childcare provider's director. No more than two attempts were made to receive parent consent.

Three children for whom consent was received were unable or unwilling to complete the task. One child was non-English speaking and a second had language development delays. These two children did not communicate (verbally or non-verbally) a desire or willingness to participate on the three separate occasions they were asked. The third child was asked to participate on three separate occasions and declined each request. This child was newly enrolled in the childcare center and was described as shy and timid by classroom teachers. No more than three attempts were made per University IRB guidelines. The final sample consisted of 41 children. Twenty-three children were identified as White, eleven were identified as Asian, five were identified as Hispanic, and two were identified as African American. All participating children received a small toy after completing the task.

## **Procedure and Measures**

**Overview.** All data were collected in one of two on-site assessment rooms located in the childcare provider. Both rooms were furnished with a child-sized table and chairs. The surrounding walls were draped with black curtains to minimize distractions. Data were collected during two sessions for all participants. The first and second sessions of data collection were separated by a 2 to 3 week period. The *Choose-A-Picture* task, which is described fully below, was completed on a touch-screen convertible laptop (ASUS Tai Chi 21-DH71 11-Inch) to control task delivery and to automatize data collection. The device was folded to ensure children only had access to the touch-screen. Children were seated in a chair adjacent to the experimenter and positioned approximately 16-inches from the touch-screen device. The experimenter placed one hand on the back of the device to ensure it stayed in an upright position for the duration of the task. The task lasted no longer than 12 minutes.

**Choose-A-Picture task.** The Choose-A-Picture (CAP) task was developed by the author to explore the relative salience of race (Black, White), emotion expression (happy, sad), and sex (boy, girl) using pictures of 168 different children's faces. As previously noted, the decision to use pictures of real children's faces, rather than cartoon or computer-generated faces, was made for ecological validity. Compared to pictures of cartoon or computer generated faces, pictures of real children's faces are used by children during their daily lives to extract and understand features that discriminate between people.

All pictures of children's faces used in the task were acquired through publically available databases. Photo-editing software was used to isolate just the faces (with hair)

and crop out all other parts of the original photographs. Pictures were then adjusted to have identical dimensions (1.3 inch width by 1.5 inch height) and resolutions (300 pixels per inch) to minimize unintentional differences between faces. Finally, the cropped faces were placed on a white background to match the color of the screen. Each of the two versions of the task consisted of 24 computer-generated items (eight per three conditions) containing three pictures arranged horizontally on the screen and centered vertically and horizontally.

Three conditions of competing stimuli were created for the task: (a) sex vs. race, (b) sex vs. emotion expression, and (c) race vs. emotion expression. Each condition consisted of eight of the 24 task items. As depicted in Figure 1, the characteristic not competing for each item was held constant; that is, for sex vs. race items, emotion expression was held constant; for sex vs. emotion expression items, race was held constant; and for race vs. emotion expression items, sex was held constant.

Additionally, of the three pictures displayed for any given item, one picture shares exactly one salient feature with the other two pictures. For example, an item for race vs. sex condition might consist of two pictures of boys' faces and one picture of a girl's face, all of whom have the same emotion expression (i.e., all happy and smiling or all sad and frowning). In this example item, which is depicted in the first row of Figure 1, the two boys differed in race (i.e., one Black boy, one White boy), while the girl is highly similar to one of the boys' race (i.e., Black girl). For this example item, selection of the White boy would suggest race is more salient than sex, selection of the Black girl would suggest sex is more salient than race, and selection of the Black boy would suggest the participant selected based on some other unobvious criteria, such as another feature of the pictures

(e.g., hair style, similarity to a friend) or a non-picture-based criteria, such as location on the screen (e.g., selecting all pictures on the left).

Two versions of the task were created for the current study. In the first version, children were instructed to “Look at all three faces and then choose one.” In the second version, the instruction was slightly altered to “Look at all three faces and then choose the one that is most different.” Both versions were included in the present study to explore whether or not providing categorization criteria (i.e., “most different”) would influence selection behaviors. In both versions of the task, the experimenter demonstrated that to “choose one” children must touch the picture on the screen with their fingers. The instruction was delivered before the pre-trial item, again before the first test trial item, and repeated every four subsequent items for a total of seven times during each version.

Only one version was completed during each session. Version order was randomly selected for the first data collection session. The version not completed during session one was completed during session two. For each item, condition (sex vs. emotion expression, sex vs. race, emotion expression vs. race), picture selection (from available pictures not previously displayed), and picture order on screen (left, center, right) were all randomized by the computer as each participant completed the task. One pre-trial item with unrelated pictures was used to help children learn how to complete the task.

**Demographic information.** Children’s age, sex, race/ethnicity, and classroom were included as independent variables in the current study. Age was treated as a continuous variable and was calculated as the amount of time elapsed between date of birth and date of first data collection session. Sex was coded as boy or girl. Due to the small sample size, teacher-reported race/ethnicity was coded as white or racial/ethnic

minority based on the race/ethnicity variance in the current sample. Finally, a 3-level nominal classroom variable was created to indicate the classroom to which participants were enrolled.

**Outcome measures.** The software developed for the task was designed to capture *response times* at the item level. Unique timestamps were created at the exact moment a new item appeared on the screen and again when a picture was selected. Item-level response times were calculated by subtracting the picture selection timestamp from the item display timestamp. Six mean response times were created for each participant by taking the average response time for every condition (3) by version (2) pairing.

Next, participants' picture selection patterns were classified as either random or non-random. As previously described, each condition consisted of eight items. Participants' selection patterns were coded as non-random if four or more pictures (at least 50%) were selected on the basis of one of the two target stimuli or the third "other" stimulus in a given condition. Any 3-3-2-selection pattern was coded as random. For example, if a participant selected three pictures based on race, three based on sex, and two based on "other" in the race vs. sex condition, the pattern (3-3-2) would indicate behavior as close to chance as the task allows.

Finally, participants whose scores were coded as non-random for a given condition were then classified into one of three preference categories based on the stimulus most commonly used for picture selections (i.e., target stimulus A, target stimulus B, or "other"). A fourth "split preference" was considered for the possibility of a 4-4-0 pattern (e.g., four sex, four race, zero other) but this pattern did not exist in the current study.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### **Data Analysis Overview**

Data analyses are organized into three sections. The first set of analyses explored the random and non-random selection during the task. The second set of analyses explored picture selection tendencies by comparing conditions to identify the relative salience of sex, emotion expression, and race. The third set of analyses explored if child-level (e.g., age) and task-related (e.g., instruction type) variables were related to stimulus preferences (e.g., tendency to select race in the sex vs. race condition).

### **Random and Non-Random Selection**

The first goal was to explore the random and non-random selection during the task before attempting to analyze and report participants' behaviors. Random picture selection is likely to indicate disengagement with the task (e.g., selecting without looking at pictures), while non-random picture selection is likely to indicate engagement in the task (e.g., selecting based on a given criteria). Basic descriptive statistics of stimuli preference variables for each condition of each instruction type (version) are reported in Table 1. As shown, similar proportions of non-random selection patterns were found across condition and instruction types.

For the version of the task with the instruction to "Look at all three faces and then choose one," 32 of 41 participants (78.1%) demonstrated non-random selection patterns for the emotion expression vs. race and emotion expression vs. sex conditions. Further, 28 of 41 participants (68.3%) produced non-random selection patterns for the race vs. sex condition in the same version. For the version of the task with the instruction to "Look at all three faces and then choose the one that is most different," 30 of 41 participants

(73.2%) demonstrated non-random selections in the emotion expression vs. race condition, and 32 of 41 participants (78.1%) selected pictures non-randomly in both the emotion expression vs. sex and face vs. sex conditions. These results provide support for the first hypothesis. Well over 50% of participants were identified as using non-random selection patterns in each condition.

Follow-up analyses were conducted to test two potential explanations for random selection patterns. First, it was reasoned that children who appeared to select pictures randomly might be identified by markedly faster *reaction times*. This explanation followed the logic that some children might have been selecting faces too quickly to complete the task with purposeful engagement. Second, it was reasoned that children were selecting pictures on the basis of location (e.g., all left) rather than using facial information. To explore this explanation, a binary *selected location* (random, non-random) variable was calculated using the same formula as the *stimuli preference* computations.

A series of binary logistic regression models were used to explore if *reaction time* or *selected picture location* predicted participants' classification as *random* or *non-random* picture selectors for each condition within each version. Interestingly, *reaction time* and *selected location* were not significant predictors of participant randomness indicating that neither hypothesis explaining these random selections was supported. Other possible explanations for why children used random selection are offered in the discussion section. Unfortunately, these other possible explanations cannot be explored using the collected data.

Because children who selected pictures at random did not focus on the salient features of the task, exploration of their selection patterns for preference of target features is impossible. Therefore, subsequent analyses will only include participants with non-random selection patterns.

### **Assessing Relative Salience**

After identifying children who used non-random selection patterns, the next step was to address the second research question: *What is the relative salience of race, sex, and emotion expression as categories used in preschoolers' processing of faces?* The frequencies of non-random picture selection patterns within conditions and across versions are reported in Table 2. Chi-square statistics are also reported for all preference groups (i.e., target A, target B, and “other”) and for competing stimuli preferences (i.e., target A or target B) for each condition and version.

Only the emotion expression vs. sex condition for the version with instruction to “*choose the one that is most different*” yielded a significant chi-square statistic,  $\chi^2(2, N=32) = 6.813, p < 0.05$ . This finding indicates significant differences in the number children with patterns selected on the basis of emotion expression, sex, and the non-target stimulus. However, when assessing only differences between the two target variables (emotion expression, sex), there was no significant finding,  $\chi^2(1, N=27) = 0.178, p = 0.178$ .

Despite limited statistical support, visual inspections of the data indicate version-specific patterns as well as some tentative information about relative salience. For instance, in the first version of the task (“*choose one*”), there was a relatively even distribution of selection patterns across the two target variables in each condition. That is

to say, there did not appear to be an apparent salience hierarchy, only that the systematic selection of target variables was far more common than systematic selection of the non-target variable in each condition. However, in the second version (“*choose the one that is most different*”), the percent spread in target variable selections became more pronounced for every condition and especially the emotion expression vs. sex condition.

In the emotion expression vs. race condition, the percent-spread in target selection patterns in the second version (10%) was higher than the first version (6.3%) by a modest margin of 3.7%. Similarly, the percent-spread was 4.8% greater in the second version (15.6%) of the race vs. sex condition compared to the first version (10.8%). Interestingly, there is a noticeably wide margin in the percent-spread of target selection patterns in the emotion expression vs. sex condition. Although the rank order was identical across conditions, emotion expression was the basis for 21.8% more patterned selections than *sex* in second version, while in first version, this percent difference was only 3.2%. This finding, in particular, suggests using the word “different” in the task instructions (second version) can result in noticeable changes in children’s picture selection processes.

In terms of sheer numbers, patterns based on sex were the least common of the target variables across both versions and relevant conditions. In all but one instance (Emotion Expression vs. Race - Version B), emotion expression was the basis for the greatest number of selection patterns. Inversely, race was responsible for the majority of selection patterns in every relevant condition with the exception of Emotion Expression vs. Race - Version A. Together, these findings seem to indicate sex is the least salient of the three target stimuli, while the relative salience of race and emotion expression depends on the nature of the categorization task at hand. This finding provides

preliminary support for the multiple salience hierarchy hypothesis, but it is important to note these findings should be interpreted tentatively. Finally, although not the subject of the current study, it is interesting to note that some children (for whom *systematic* patterns were identified) based their picture selections on the non-target variable. Possible explanations for this finding are included in the discussion.

### **Predictors of Stimuli Preferences**

The final set of analyses was used to answer the third research question: *Are there individual and situational factors that help explain and predict the relative salience of race, sex, and emotion expression?* Due to the unexpected finding that some children systematically selected faces characterized by the non-target variable across conditions, “*other*” was included as a third preference group for each condition. Multinomial logistic regression models were used to identify predictors of stimulus preference groups for each condition. Version (A or B), task order (i.e., which version children completed first) and participant age, sex, race/ethnicity, and classroom were included in each model. Results for likelihood ratio tests are presented in Table 3.

The emotion expression vs. sex condition was the only instance in which predictor variables were statistically significant, however, the overall model did not fit the data better than the model including only the intercept,  $\chi^2(14, N = 64) = 21.728, p = 0.084$ . To improve fit, the model was reduced to exclude version and version order as these two variables contributed the least to the overall model. The final model included only age, race/ethnicity, sex, and classroom, resulting in significantly improved fit to the data,  $\chi^2(10, N = 64) = 20.596, \text{Nagelkerke } R^2 = 0.317, p = 0.024$ . Hosmer-Lemeshow

tests were conducted to assess goodness of fit of the final model and were not statistically significant, indicating good fit between predictors in the final model and the data.

The group of children with an emotion expression preference were used as the reference group for comparing parameter estimates. Only the race/ethnicity parameter estimate was significant. Interestingly, White participants were 20.62 times more likely to belong in the "other" preference group than the emotion expression preference group, compared to non-White children.

Additional models were conducted for both the emotion expression vs. race and race vs. sex conditions. While no combination of predictors resulted in statistical significance for the emotion expression vs. race models, dropping race/ethnicity from the race vs. sex condition model resulted in significant predictors and improved model fit. The best-fitting model for race vs. sex condition included version, version order, age, sex, and classroom, and the model including predictors was better fit to the data than the model including only the intercept,  $\chi^2 (12, N = 60) = 22.688$ , Nagelkerke  $R^2 = 0.359$ ,  $p = 0.030$ . Similarly to the emotion expression vs. sex condition model, Hosmer-Lemeshow tests were not significant.

Children with a race preference were used as the comparison group in the final model. Age was the only predictor with a statistically significant parameter estimate. For each standard deviation increase in age (0.646 years), the odds of being in the sex preference group increased multiplicatively by 4.077. In other words, the likelihood of sex being a more salient facial feature than race increases as children get older.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current study was to test a new competing facial stimuli categorization task, to explore the relative salience of sex, race, and emotion expression categories among preschoolers, and to examine how child characteristics and adult instructions relate to preschoolers' categorization patterns. Previous work in the field of childhood facial categorization provides a strong foundation for identifying social categories that are meaningful to young children. The current study builds upon previous literature by integrating several important social categories identified by other studies into a single task by presenting these characteristics simultaneously as competing stimuli.

One important contribution of the current task was the use of the competing stimuli approach because it provides a comprehensive and generalizable understanding for how preschoolers process facial stimuli in real-world situations. That is, it is more likely for children to encounter individuals with multiple characteristic differences (e.g., happy boy, sad girl) rather than only a single, one characteristic difference (e.g., happy boy, happy girl). Although a discernable stimuli salience hierarchy was not revealed in the current study, findings from the task did highlight at least one additional benefit of using a competing stimuli approach: young children continue to use sex, race, and emotion expression categories above and beyond "other" facial stimuli (e.g., eye size or color), even when presented in various combinations (e.g., *sex* and *race* or *race* and *emotion expression* in a single item).

For the majority of trials, a clear systematic pattern of selection was attributable to target facial features (i.e., sex, race, emotion expression). This finding affirmed the decision to use real (rather than artificial) faces. Target facial features remained salient to

children despite uncontrolled "other" differences, such as hair style, skin tone, eye color, or smile intensity. These preliminary findings suggest that children do indeed group other children based on broad categories rather than subtle differences as suggested by the categorical perception literature (Calder et al., 1996; Chael & Rutherford, 2011).

A second noteworthy contribution of the current study was the inclusion of both the spontaneous (choose one) and externally imposed (choose the one that's most different) versions of the task. Many of the studies in the child categorization literature explore how children categorize faces in response to the conditions imposed upon them by adults. This externally imposed approach likely influences how children perform categorization tasks and does not necessarily represent how children process facial stimuli in a more spontaneous and natural settings. For example, in Chael and Rutherford's (1988) facial emotion categorization task, 3.5-year-olds were instructed to describe if pictures "felt the same" or "felt different." While this instruction might appear simple to adults, it might be a relatively sophisticated and cognitively demanding task for young children because it requires them to understand and process several pieces of information simultaneously (i.e., two pictures of faces and the words "felt," "same," and "different).

Although the findings were not statistically significant, there is some evidence to suggest the simple addition of the word "different" in the instructions changed the way some children completed the task. This externally imposed version of the task seemed to produce a greater divide in the stimuli children selected compared to the spontaneous version. In the spontaneous task, the number of children who selected pictures based on one of the two target variables was virtually identical and never exceeded a three

participant difference. In contrast, when instructed to use the word “different” as a categorization criteria, there was as high as a seven participant (21.8%) difference in stimuli preferences. This finding can help inform future work with young children within and beyond the field of categorization.

In a more applied sense, subtle changes in the way adults instruct children to perform a task may cause children to approach social stimuli in a markedly different way than they do spontaneously. Although categorization, to adults, might tacitly imply noticing differences between stimuli, it is possible children do not approach social categorization with this mindset. Instead, there could be other unobvious criteria young children use (implicitly and/or intentionally) to categorize objects in their environment, or in this case, faces of people. Adults who interact with young children should be mindful of the language they use around young children, as it likely shapes the ways they perceive their social world. Future work with the *Choose A Picture* task will include new categorization criteria (e.g., “choose the picture you like most”) to explore how various adult instructions shape the ways children think and behave.

One unanticipated finding of the current study was the presence of a small number of children who systematically selected the "other" (non-target) variable in each condition. There are at least two explanations for this finding. First, it is possible these patterns represent a mere coincidence. The working definition for “non-random” in the current study was the presence of a target, or in this case non-target, stimulus being selected in at least 50% of the trials in a given condition. It is possible these children (and potentially others) were selecting pictures on the basis of some unknown feature or simply at random, and happened to choose four or more of the "other" stimulus.

However, it is also possible some or all of these children represent a subset of the sample that is demonstrating highly sophisticated categorizations. In other words, these children may be noticing the two target stimuli and intentionally choosing "other" because it shares one category with each of the other two. Future work implementing this task with larger and more diverse samples will attempt to further explain this phenomenon.

There were several limitations of the current study. First, a small and relatively homogenous convenience sample was used. As such, the findings of the study should only be tentatively generalized to other populations of preschoolers. The decision to use a convenience sample was made because it was unknown whether or not the task would be an effective tool worth implementing at a larger scale. With only 41 participants, the statistical analyses conducted in the current study were likely underpowered and therefore unable to identify potential effects. The task does, however, appear to function well and will be used to conduct more rigorous studies in the future.

A second limitation was the inability to explain (statically) why the task did not work as intended for some of the participants, both in terms of non-systematic (i.e., random) picture selection, and systematic selection of non-target stimuli. Neither reaction times (indicative of hasty picture selection) nor selected location (e.g., systematically choosing left) explained random picture selections. These null findings are likely explained by a combination of small sample size and the fact that these were not always the same participants. As previously described, systematic selection of "other" might represent a unique (or coincidental) pattern of selection, and future research should consider this population of children *a priori*.

Finally, the current study did not identify a salience hierarchy as hoped and, consequentially, it was difficult to find predictors that provided meaningful explanations for the relative salience of the sex, race, and emotion expression of faces. Indeed, the current study was only used to examine two dimensions of context (i.e., competing stimuli and spontaneous- vs. externally imposed) and the roles of other contextual factors, such as previous social experiences, interactions, and environments, should be given more rigorous thought and attention (Pauker et al., 2015). Future research with this task will benefit from a more thorough investigation of environmental influences (e.g., neighborhood characteristics, home and school environments) that might explain and predict the relative salience of facial stimuli. Nevertheless, the current study did identify systematic patterns explained by sex, race, and emotion expression categories using a relatively small sample of children and only requiring them to select pictures of faces. The simplicity of the task, its ease of implementation, and its overall effectiveness warrant its continued use (with these and other stimuli) with larger and more diverse samples.

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Table 1

*Proportion of Non-Random Selection Patterns by Condition and Instruction Type*

| Condition                   | Version A              | Version B              |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Emotion Expression vs. Race | 0.781 (0.419) $n = 32$ | 0.732 (0.449) $n = 30$ |
| Emotion Expression vs. Sex  | 0.781 (0.419) $n = 32$ | 0.781 (0.419) $n = 32$ |
| Race vs. Sex                | 0.683 (0.471) $n = 28$ | 0.781 (0.419) $n = 32$ |

*Note.* Standard deviations are reported in parentheses.

Table 2

*Number and Percentage of Participants Selecting Pictures Based on Emotion Expression, Sex, Race, and “Other”*

| Version             | Frequency Emotion | Frequency Sex | Frequency Race | Frequency “Other” | Chi-square All Groups | Chi-square Target Only |
|---------------------|-------------------|---------------|----------------|-------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| A                   |                   |               |                |                   |                       |                        |
| ER ( <i>n</i> = 32) | 14 (43.8%)        | -             | 12 (37.5%)     | 6 (18.8%)         | 3.250                 | 0.154                  |
| ES ( <i>n</i> = 32) | 14 (43.8%)        | 13 (40.6%)    | -              | 5 (15.6%)         | 4.563                 | 0.037                  |
| RS ( <i>n</i> = 28) | -                 | 9 (32.1%)     | 12 (42.9%)     | 7 (25%)           | 1.357                 | 0.429                  |
| B                   |                   |               |                |                   |                       |                        |
| ER ( <i>n</i> = 30) | 11 (36.7%)        | -             | 14 (46.7%)     | 5 (16.7%)         | 4.200                 | 0.360                  |
| ES ( <i>n</i> = 32) | 17 (53.1%)        | 10 (31.3%)    | -              | 5 (15.6%)         | 6.813*                | 1.815                  |
| RS ( <i>n</i> = 32) | -                 | 11 (34.4%)    | 16 (50%)       | 5 (15.6%)         | 5.688                 | 0.926                  |

*Note.* \* =  $p < .05$  (ER = Emotion Expression vs. Race; ES = Emotion Expression vs. Sex; RS = Race vs. Sex)

Table 3

*Predictors' Contributions in the Multinomial Logistic Regression by Condition*

| Predictors     | Emotion vs. Sex |           |          | Emotion vs. Race |           |          | Race vs. Sex |           |          |
|----------------|-----------------|-----------|----------|------------------|-----------|----------|--------------|-----------|----------|
|                | $X^2$           | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> | $X^2$            | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> | $X^2$        | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> |
| Age            | 2.37            | 2         | .306     | .027             | 2         | .987     | 4.67         | 2         | .097     |
| Race/Ethnicity | 8.51            | 2         | .014*    | 2.04             | 2         | .362     | 1.51         | 2         | .469     |
| Sex            | 4.91            | 2         | .086     | 3.71             | 2         | .157     | 4.46         | 2         | .108     |
| Classroom      | 9.76            | 4         | .045*    | 5.47             | 4         | .243     | 6.86         | 4         | .143     |
| Version        | 1.08            | 2         | .582     | .624             | 2         | .732     | 2.61         | 2         | .271     |
| Version Order  | .090            | 2         | .956     | 1.64             | 2         | .440     | 4.58         | 2         | .101     |

*Note.*  $X^2$  = the amount of increase in -2 log likelihood when the predictor is removed from full model. \**p* < .05.

Figure 1

*Example Items for Each Condition*

| Condition                          | Target A   | Target B  | “Other”  |
|------------------------------------|--|---|--|
| <i>Race vs. Sex</i>                |   |   |   |
| <i>Emotion Expression vs. Sex</i>  |   |   |   |
| <i>Emotion Expression vs. Race</i> |  |  |  |

*Note.* Pictures are presented in a non-randomized order and are reduced in size for comparison