

## **Mamie P. Clark**

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Mamie Phipps Clark (born July 14, 1914 Hot Springs, Arkansas – August 11, 1983, New York City, New York) was an American developmental psychologist best known for her work on the development of African American children's sense of self, specifically through a series of experiments conducted with her husband Kenneth Clark known as the "Doll Studies." These studies would be instrumental in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* court decision in which school segregation was declared unconstitutional.

Born to a middle-class family, Clark was raised in Hot Springs, AK, a southern town with a racial climate that was considered tolerant for the early 1900's. Despite the town's progressiveness, Clark still attended segregated schools for most her life. Clark was a remarkable student and excelled academically. In 1934, at just sixteen years of age, she was admitted with scholarship to the historically Black college Howard University, in Washington D.C. Initially Clark intended to major in mathematics and physics; however, she began to reconsider this path after experiences of gender prejudice. During her sophomore year she met her future husband and research collaborator, K. Clark, who was a master's student and teaching assistant in Howards' psychology program. Once they began dating, K. Clark persuaded Clark to consider a career as a psychologist because she expressed a desire to work with children. The two continued their relationship, even after K. Clark graduated from Howard and began his doctoral studies in psychology at Columbia University. In 1937 Clark and K. Clark were married and Clark earned

her bachelor's degree in psychology. She was also awarded a graduate fellowship for Howard's masters in psychology program.

While working on her Masters at Howard, Clark became fascinated with developmental psychologists Ruth and Gene Horowitz's research on the processes of "self-identification" in pre-school aged children. Clark was curious how racism and segregation influenced Black children's development of a sense of self. This question would result in her Master's Thesis entitled "The Development of Consciousness of Self in Negro Pre-School Children", and the foundation for the Clark's famous "Doll Studies". In these studies, children were presented four dolls, which were identical except for their skin color (two Black dolls and two White dolls). Black children were then asked various questions about the dolls such as which one they would like to play with and which one looked nice/bad. The results of the experiment ultimately showed that majority of the Black children preferred the White doll. This work was influential as it led to more research in developmental psychology on self-concept and self-esteem. Furthermore, this research influenced the creation of the first mass-produced Black doll, the Saralee doll.

After earning her Master's degree from Howard in 1940, Clark was admitted into Columbia's doctoral program in psychology. She was the first Black woman admitted to the program and the second Black student ever. While at Columbia, Clark continued her research on racial identification in Black children with the aid of a three-year grant from the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship program that her and her husband had received the year prior. By 1943, Clark had completed her Ph.D. but struggled to find employment due to a combination of racial and gender discrimination. Clark once stated that "a black female with a Ph.D. in psychology was an unwanted anomaly in New York City in the early 1940s." After a brief stint of

unemployment, Clark worked for the American Public Health Association as data analyst and for the United States Armed Forces Institute as research psychologist from 1944-1946.

Later in 1946, Clark worked as a staff psychologist for an agency that advocated for Black, homeless girls. While working there she realized there was a severe lack of psychological services for Black children, resulting in many Black children being improperly diagnosed with mental retardation. As a result Clark and her husband created the the Northside Center for Child Development (NCCD), where they focused on psychosocial stressors that impacted Black children's psychology. More than a mental health center, the NCCD handled issues of racial justice and community advocacy. Clark served as executive director of the center from 1946 to 1979. Clark's research made a number of contributions to both field of psychology and society at large. Unfortunately, Clark has not received as much recognition as her husband for their work which was primarily inspired by her master's thesis. Despite her being less well known than her husband, there is no denying that Clark's work was invaluable to the field of psychology.

### **Further Reading**

- Butler, S. (2009). Mamie Katherine Phipps Clark (1917–1983). *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*. Retrieved October 30, 2017 from <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=2938>
- Lal, S. (2002). Giving children security: Mamie Phipps Clark and the racialization of child psychology. *American Psychologist*, 57, 20-28.