

Kenneth B. Clark

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Kenneth B. Clark (born July 14, 1914, unincorporated territory of the Panama Canal Zone – May 1, 2005, Hastings-on-Hudson, New York) was an American experimental psychologist best known for his work on understanding the development of African American children's sense of self, specifically through a series of studies known as the "doll tests".

In 1919, when Clark was four, his family moved to Harlem, New York, because his mother wanted better educational opportunities for him and his sister, Beulah. Clark, excelled academically, which made him a regular target of racial prejudice particularly at his recently integrated high school, George Washington High in New York. These experiences are believed to be part of why Clark dedicated much of his life trying to understand the effects of racism on Black children.

Upon graduation from high school (1931), Clark enrolled at Howard University, a historically Black institution in Washington, D.C., with the intent of becoming a medical doctor. However, after taking one course with Francis Cecil Sumner, known as the "Father of Black Psychology", Clark gained interest in understanding and combating racism from a psychological perspective and changed his major. Under Sumner's mentorship, Clark went on to pursue a Masters in psychology at Howard. During his graduate studies, he met his future wife and research collaborator, Mamie Phipps Clark, whom he persuaded to also pursue a career in psychology. After receiving his masters in psychology from Howard in 1936, Clark taught there for two years. In that same year Clark and M. Clark got married. Shortly after, M. Clark's

graduated with her BA in psychology and entered the master's in psychology program at Howard, while Clark moved to New York to begin the PhD program in experimental psychology at Columbia University. He completed his doctoral studies in 1940, making him the first Black American awarded a doctoral degree in psychology at Columbia University.

While M. Clark was still at Howard, Clark undertook his first postdoctoral teaching position at Hampton Institute in Virginia, where he was tasked with forming a psychology department. While at Hampton Institute, he was also employed as a research psychologist at the Office of War Information. Once M. Clark had completed her master's thesis, which would later become the inspiration of their groundbreaking collaborative "doll study" research, they settled in New York. M. Clark entered Columbia University as the first African American woman doctoral candidate in the school's history (1943), and Clark became a professor of psychology at the City College (CUNY). Clark enjoyed his position at City College for his academic growth and the laissez faire culture of the institution. He would also become CUNY's first Black tenured professor in psychology.

In the late 1940's, Robert Carter a lawyer for the Legal Defense and Education Fund of the NAACP, reached out to Clark after reading some of his work. The Legal Defense and Education Fund of the NAACP were planning to challenge state sanctioned segregation based, in part, on the premise that segregation created feeling of inferior status for Black students. As such Carter and others believed that Clark's and M. Clark's doll experiments and other work on the detrimental effects of racial segregation on personality development of Black children could play role in overturning "separate but equal" doctrine in the U.S. The Clark and Clark's doll study – in addition to the article Clark wrote on the psychological effects of segregation for the Mid-Century White House Conference on Children and Youth (1950) – was instrumental in the

Supreme Court *Brown* decision that deemed racial segregation of public education as unconstitutional.

Clark believed that all schools would be segregated five years after *Brown*, to Clark's dismay, *Brown v. Board of Education* decision failed to live up to the monumental changes that were promised. Post *Brown*, Clark continued his work on the effects of racism on Black children with the Northside Center for Child Development, a center that he and his wife established in 1946. While maintaining his positions at CUNY and the Northside Center, he became the chairman of the board of trustees for the Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited in 1962. Clark went on to publish multiple books and articles on the effects of prejudice and oppression on Black children and adults. In 1970, Clark was elected president of the American Psychological Association due to his many contributions to the field. Clark is the first and only Black American to hold the position.

Further Reading

Reminiscences of Kenneth Clark [Interview by E. Edwin]. (2006). Retrieved Sept. & oct., 2017,

from <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/nny/clarkk/introduction.html>

"Clark, Kenneth B. 1914–." *Contemporary Black Biography*. (2005). Retrieved October, 2017

from Encyclopedia.com: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/education/news-wires-white->

[papers-and-books/clark-kenneth-b-1914](http://www.encyclopedia.com/education/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/clark-kenneth-b-1914)

Kenneth Bancroft Clark Papers: A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress

[Advertisement]. (2012, August). Retrieved Sept. & oct., 2017, from

<http://rs5.loc.gov/service/mss/eadxlmss/eadpdfmss/1998/ms998002.pdf>