

Can you change your race? It's complicated.

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Research Question: Where do people believe the race-determining essence resides? More specifically, when presented with hypothetical transformations, (e.g. brain transplant, skin graft), participants were asked which, if any, might change a person's racial category.

Predictions: When writing about race, nearly half of all participants (n=102) explicitly mention skin tone. Therefore it was predicted that a hypothetical transformation involving a skin tone change would be most strongly endorsed as race-changing.

Methods: Participants responded to 2 open-ended prompts: one asking how they defined race, and one asking them to explain their own racial identity. Then, participants made a binary choice about whether 10 hypothetical events would change someone's race (see prompts below). After evaluating each item individually, participants ranked 7 of the proposed items from most likely to change one's race to least likely. Participants then completed an abbreviated version of the Race Conceptions Scale, which assesses essentialist thinking by measuring the extent to which people believe that race is genetically determined or socially constructed.

Prompt	Transformation	Type
"Suppose that somebody was in a car accident and needed the following surgery or treatment to survive their injuries. Would the following event change their race?"	Brain Transplant	Deep
	Heart Transplant	Deep
	Bone marrow	Deep
	Blood transfusion	Deep
	Skin Graft	Superficial
"If somebody was born with the following disease, would they be the same race as their family?"	Albino	Disease
"If somebody was born with the following disease, would their race change when their skin color changes?"	Vitiligo	Disease
"In the future, if we were to take the ___ from a human and place that ___ in a robot, would the robot be the same race as the human was?"	Robot brain	Futuristic
	Robot Soul	Futuristic

Results:

- Participants were significantly more likely to state that a brain transplant would alter one's race, not a skin graft, despite nearly half of participants (45%) explicitly citing skin tone in their definition of race ($F(6,11) = 69.23, p < .001$)
- Nearly half (46%) of the participants rejected ALL types of transformations as being powerful enough to change one's racial category



Though people often cite *skin color* in their *definitions of race*, people actually consider *the brain* to be a more important factor in determining race.



Results cont.:

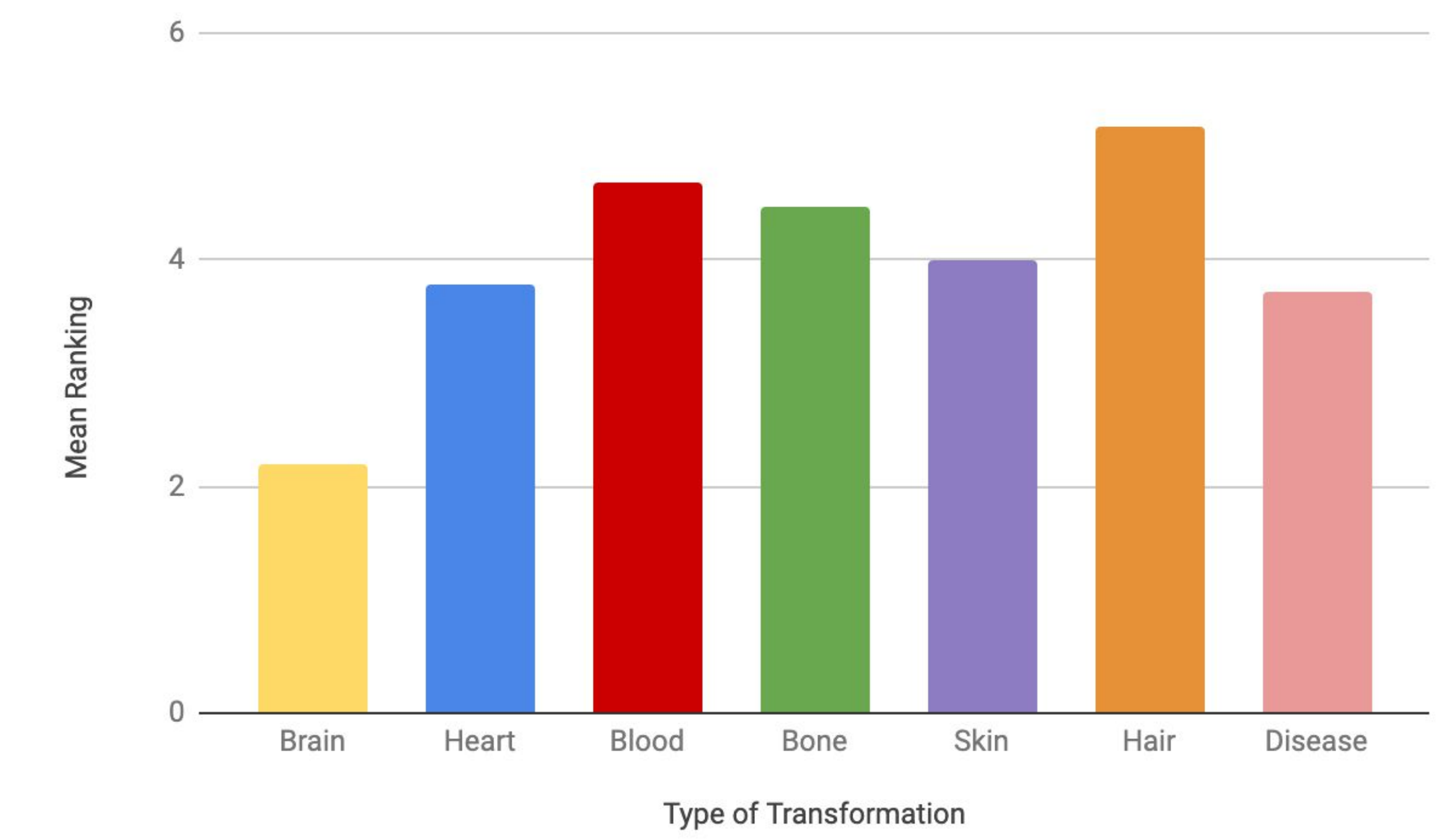


Figure 1: Mean rankings (1-7) of likelihood of various transformations to change one's race

- Open-ended explanations were coded for the presence of essentialist thinking, revealing that 47% of participants spontaneously produced essentialist-consistent language when defining race, and 52% when describing their own race.
- Unsurprisingly, participants who used genetic explanations to define race were significantly more likely to also demonstrate the spontaneous production of essentialist-consistent language in their responses ($X^2(1) = 40.80, p < .001$).

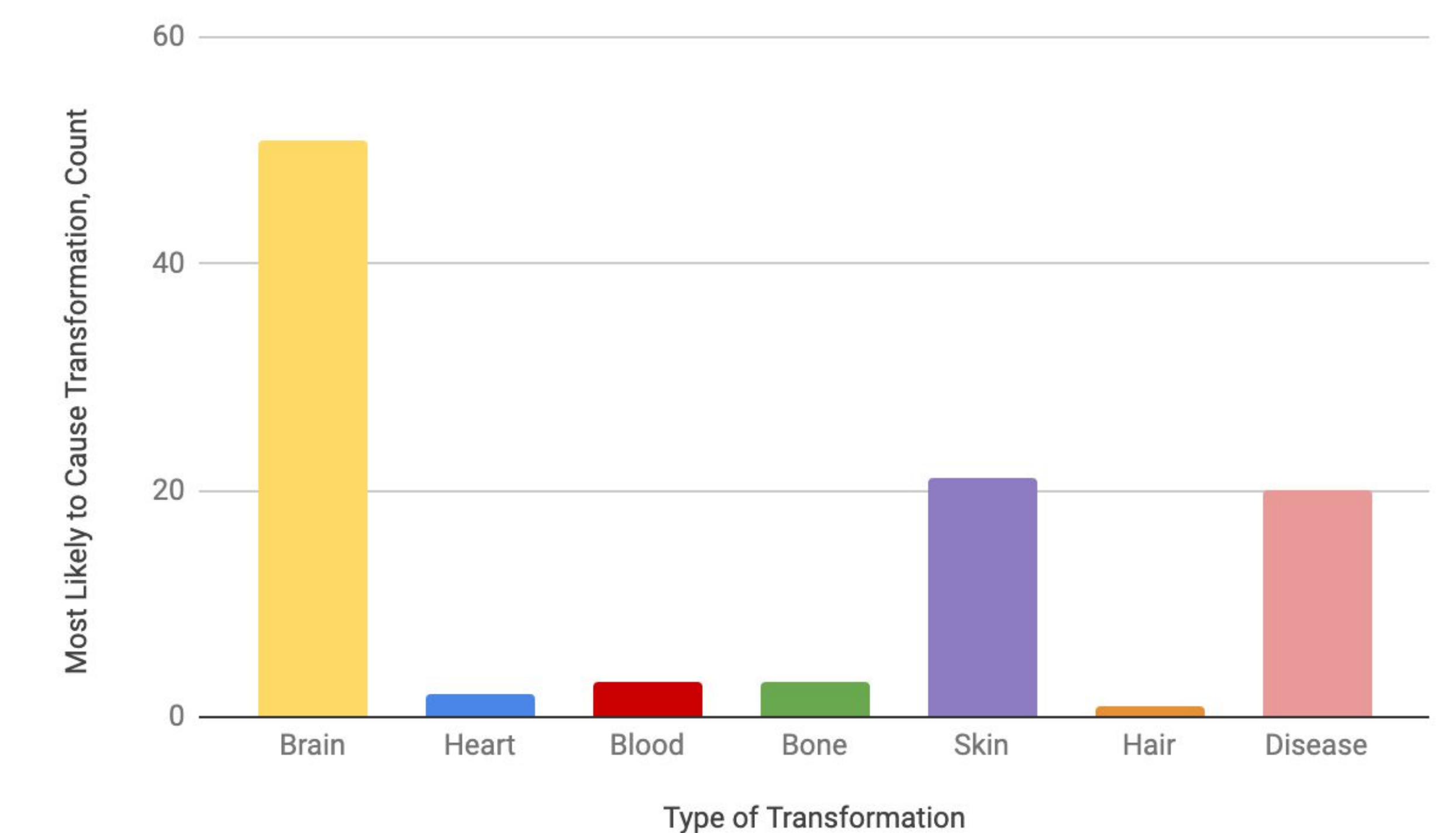


Figure 2: Number of times each transformation was ranked most likely to change one's race

Discussion: These findings suggest a disconnect between how people claim to conceptualize race and how they actually do. Further investigation into this disconnect could reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of our own conceptions which may be linked to underlying cognitive processes. This misunderstanding may hinder those attempting to quell their own race-based biases.

References:

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