


“This kid looks like he has everything”: 3- to 11-year-old children’s concerns for fairness and social preferences when peers differ in social class and race

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Abstract

This study investigated 3- to 11-year-old US children's ($N = 348$) perceptions of access to resources, social group preferences, and resource distribution decisions and reasoning when hypothetical peers differed in social class (poor or rich) and race (Black or White). Data were collected in 2019. The sample reflected the region where data were collected in terms of gender (44% girls, 30% boys, 1% another identity) and race and ethnicity (46% White, 10% multiracial or multiethnic, 9% Black, 5% Latinx, 2% Asian, 3% another identity), and parents reported a higher average level of education than the regional average. Results revealed both marked age differences in children's perceptions, preferences, decisions, and reasoning and specific combinations of peer group memberships that were especially likely to receive preferential treatment. With age, children perceived that rich peers had greater access to resources than poor peers, but when both peers were poor, White peers were perceived to have more resources than Black peers. Social group preferences changed with age, from mixed social class and racial group preferences, to preferences for rich peers, to dislike for rich peers. Resource allocation decisions and reasoning reflected both social group and fairness concerns: young children distributed more to White peers especially if they were also rich, participants in middle childhood explicitly favored rich peers regardless of their race, and older children distributed more to poor peers and reasoned about either moral concerns for equity or social class stereotypes. Thus, overall, younger children's responses often reflected broader economic and racial inequalities while older children often sought to create more equity, though not always for moral reasons.

As a part of understanding the societies that they live in, children actively interpret the social inequalities that they observe and experience in their family, peer, school, and neighborhood contexts, seeking to explain why things are structured the way they are and forming judgments about the consequences (Elenbaas et al., 2020).

This is important because, to address social inequalities, it is crucial to understand the beliefs that motivate people to challenge the status quo (Ruck et al., 2019). Interpersonal interactions can perpetuate social inequalities because people are immersed in inequitable social systems (Roberts & Rizzo, 2020). Yet, as active agents

Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; ICC, intraclass correlation coefficient; LR, likelihood ratio; OR, odds ratios; SE, standard error; SES, socioeconomic status; SRD, social reasoning developmental.

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in their social world, children have opportunities to resist through their own reasoning and decision-making (Killen & Dahl, 2021). This study focused on reasoning and decision-making in a peer context, using a design that contrasted 3- to 11 year-old US children's attitudes and behavior in contexts where hypothetical peers differed in social class (poor or rich), race (Black or White), or both group memberships. The study examined: (1) age differences in children's perceptions of peers' access to resources and social group preferences, (2) how children at different ages prioritized these concerns in a distributive justice context, and (3) how children's decisions differed under different intergroup conditions.

Theoretical framework: Social reasoning developmental model

This study drew on an integrative theoretical framework called the social reasoning developmental (SRD) model (Killen & Rutland, 2011). The SRD model integrates social domain theory (Smetana et al., 2014) and social identity development theory (Nesdale, 2004) to provide a framework for understanding how children make sense of moral issues in intergroup contexts. This model takes a constructivist perspective highlighting the central role of the child in actively interpreting their social world and focuses, in particular, on developing reasoning about morality, group identity, and the psychological states of others (Rutland et al., 2010).

Research questions developed using the SRD model often ask when, how, and why reasoning about morality and group identity *changes* across development, how children at different ages *coordinate* and *prioritize* these often competing concerns, and how both developmental changes as well as coordination and prioritization patterns *differ* across intergroup contexts or identities. In the current study, the moral issue at stake was equity, the group identities involved were social class and race, the developmental period spanned from early to middle to late childhood, and intergroup contexts were manipulated experimentally.

Intergroup attitudes about social class and race

Children often prefer members of their social in-groups; however, group status can moderate in-group preferences (Nesdale, 2004). For instance, young children (3–5 years) from upper middle class US families prefer to play with and befriend-rich peers over poor peers, but young children from lower middle class families show less consistent social class group preferences (Horwitz et al., 2014; Shutts et al., 2016). Similarly, young White children typically prefer to affiliate with White peers over Black peers, while young Black children show more mixed or equal racial group preferences (Newheiser &

Olson, 2012; Renno & Shutts, 2015). The status of social groups likewise informs stereotypes about those groups. For example, by late childhood (9–11 years) US children hold ambivalent stereotypes about both rich people (e.g., intelligent but snobby) and poor people (e.g., irresponsible but kind; Elenbaas & Killen, 2019; Mistry et al., 2015).

Finally, by 6 years of age, US children of multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds associate social class and race, linking White people with wealth and Black people with poverty (Elenbaas & Killen, 2016a; Mandalaywala et al., 2020). These associations gain strength in late childhood and early adolescence (Ghavami & Mistry, 2019).

Moral reasoning about distributive justice

Distributive justice refers to the principles that people use to fairly allocate resources and opportunities including, for example, principles of equality (equal resources for all) and equity (more resources for those with less). Young children (3–5 years) recognize that monopolizing shared resources (e.g., hoarding all the snacks for oneself) is unfair (Smetana & Ball, 2019), distribute familiar items such as stickers and candy equally among peers in third-party contexts (Olson & Spelke, 2008), and judge that others should do the same (Rizzo & Killen, 2016).

In middle childhood (6–8 years), children begin to consistently recognize equity principles, often distributing more resources (e.g., toys, snacks) to peers with less and reasoning about this approach as fair (Essler & Paulus, 2021; Schmidt et al., 2016). As they take on more roles in social systems, older children (9–11 years) increasingly take into account the degree and implications of existing disparities between peers when deciding which resource distribution is most fair (Elenbaas, 2019; Rizzo et al., 2016).

A SRD perspective on social inequality

Thus, between early and late childhood children increasingly reason about the distributive principle of equity as fair *and* increasingly express social preferences based on social class and race. What we do not know is how children prioritize these potentially competing moral and social group concerns in social contexts where resources are limited.

Three prior studies from the SRD perspective have addressed US children's reasoning about distributive justice when peers differed in *either* social class *or* race. Together, their results suggest that young children often prioritize in-group members for access to resources (Elenbaas et al., 2016), but older children who are aware of social inequalities *and* consider them unfair are likely to rectify similar resource disparities that are within

their sphere of influence (Elenbaas, 2019; Elenbaas & Killen, 2016b). These findings help inform hypotheses for the current study, and they also raise at least two questions that call for further investigation.

First, developmentally, children likely prioritize their moral concerns for fairness and social concerns about group membership very differently in early, middle, and late childhood. Yet, there are no studies from the SRD perspective addressing distributive justice in intergroup contexts during all three developmental periods. In fact, in the broader sub-fields as well, a disproportionate amount of what is currently known about both distributive fairness concerns and social intergroup biases pertains to early childhood (3–5 years). This limits the conclusions that can be drawn about potential developmental changes and interactions in these areas.

For instance, US children's social class stereotypes change meaningfully in both scope and content between middle and late childhood (Mistry et al., 2021), and it is well established that White children's racial prejudice peaks in middle childhood (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). Moreover, recent studies suggest that late childhood is an important developmental period when children's greater awareness of equity issues in their own communities enables them to begin to see parallels with distributive justice issues that they can personally address (Elenbaas & Mistry, 2021). Beyond questions of early origins in early childhood, investigating changes in how children prioritize fairness and social group preferences during early, middle, and late childhood would provide a more truly developmental perspective on the emergence of equity concerns in contexts reflecting social inequality.

Second, conceptually, recent research from several theoretical perspectives including the SRD model (e.g., Burkholder et al., 2021), social cognitive theories of early categorization (e.g., Lei & Rhodes, 2021), and developmental applications of intersectionality theory (e.g., Rogers et al., 2015) converge to highlight a need to understand developing intergroup attitudes about multiple group memberships. Everyone is a member of multiple social groups, but most research addresses one at a time (e.g., asks about gender stereotypes without asking how different gender stereotypes are often applied to people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds). Prior research has separately addressed both social class and race in distributive justice contexts. However, investigating the joint effects of both group memberships would provide important information about the specificity of preferential and inequitable treatment.

For instance, recent SRD-informed research has shown that social class and race jointly effect children's decisions about peer social inclusion and exclusion. In two studies, socioeconomically diverse Black and White US 8- to 14 year-olds were asked about including or excluding individual peers who matched a larger group either in race (Black or White) or in social class (poor

or rich). In childhood, White participants were more likely to include based on race than Black participants were, but by adolescence, participants from both racial backgrounds included based on social class (Burkholder et al., 2021). Simultaneously, participants judged it less wrong to exclude based on social class than based on race, particularly if they personally identified as higher in subjective social status (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Overview of the current study

To investigate these questions about developmental differences and multiple group memberships, this study was guided by three primary research questions aligned with the foci of the SRD model (Killen & Rutland, 2011). (1) How do perceptions of peers' access to resources and social group preferences based on social class and race change across childhood? (2) How do children at different ages prioritize these potentially competing concerns in a distributive justice context where both are salient? (3) How do these attitudes and decisions differ under different intergroup conditions?

To address these research questions, participants were first randomized into one of six between-subjects conditions in which they were introduced to two hypothetical peers who differed in social class (poor or rich), race (Black or White), or both social class and race. Measures assessed perceptions of access to resources ("Which kid has more toys at home?"), social group preferences based on social class and race ("Which kid do you like more?"), and resource distribution and reasoning ("Which kid [do you want to give more stickers to] + Why?"). Age (in years) was a continuous variable in all analyses; we refer to age groups in the hypotheses to facilitate comparisons with past research in this area.

Hypotheses

Perceptions of peers' access to resources and social group preferences based on social class and race

We predicted that participants would perceive that rich peers had greater access to resources than poor peers by at least middle childhood (6–8 years; e.g., Ahl et al., 2019). When peers shared the same social class but differed in race, we predicted that participants at all ages would think White peers had more (e.g., Elenbaas & Killen, 2016a). We predicted that participants in early (3–5 years) and middle (6–8 years) childhood, but not older, would like rich peers more than poor peers (e.g., Shutts et al., 2016), particularly when the rich peers were White (e.g., Newheiser & Olson, 2012). However, the latter prediction was considered exploratory for this sample. We also explored potential differences in perceptions



or preferences by child race or ethnicity and family socioeconomic status (SES; parent education).

Resource distribution and reasoning

We posed two possible hypotheses about resource distribution and reasoning. If participants prioritized social group preferences, then those in early (3–5 years) and middle (6–8 years) childhood, but likely not older, should distribute more resources to either rich peers or White peers depending on the condition (e.g., Mandalaywala et al., 2021) and should reason about social group preferences and stereotypes related to social class or race. By contrast, if participants prioritized equity, then they should distribute more resources to poor peers and reason about fairness concerns for equity by at least middle childhood (6–8 years; e.g., Rizzo & Killen, 2016). We also explored potential differences in distributions and reasoning by child race or ethnicity and family SES (parent education).

METHOD

Research site

The study site was in and around Rochester, NY, a mid-sized city in the northeastern United States. This region has been a site for debate about social inequality for over a century. It is the historic home of important civil rights leaders including Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony, whose names and statues are prominently displayed across the city. It is an area with high de facto racial and economic segregation; Black families are disproportionately concentrated in the city's poorest neighborhoods while the majority-White suburbs are mostly middle class (ACT Rochester, 2020). The region contains the most economically segregated school district boundary in the U.S. (EdBuild, 2020).

The specific focus on poor and rich social class groups and Black and White racial groups in this study was directly informed by the region's history as well as longstanding theory and research in U.S. developmental and social psychology (Roberts & Rizzo, 2020). In short, the study participants were growing up in an area characterized by a complex interplay between a spirit of community and progressivism and systemic economic and racial injustice.

Participants

Participants were 3- to 11-year-old children ($N = 348$, $M = 6.77$ years, $SD = 2.42$ years) recruited in 2019 from 13 community sites (e.g., public parks, after-school programs, libraries). Table 1 provides complete demographic

TABLE 1 Sample demographics

	%	<i>n</i>
Child age		
3 years	9	30
4 years	15	53
5 years	10	34
6 years	12	43
7 years	13	44
8 years	16	57
9 years	9	30
10 years	9	30
11 years	7	24
Not provided	1	3
Child gender		
Girl	44	152
Boy	30	104
Another identity	1	2
Not provided	26	90
Child race or ethnicity		
White	46	161
Black	9	30
Latinx	5	16
Asian	2	6
Multiracial or multiethnic	10	34
Another identity	3	9
Not provided	26	92
Approximate annual family income		
<\$25K	6	19
\$25K–\$35K	8	28
\$35K–\$50K	7	24
\$50K–\$75K	9	31
\$75K–\$100K	16	54
\$100K–\$150K	12	41
\$150K–\$200K	4	13
>\$200K	8	28
Not provided	32	110
Parent's highest level of education		
High school graduate	9	30
Some college	14	49
Bachelor's degree	20	71
Graduate degree	28	98
Not provided	29	100
Total <i>N</i>		348

information for the sample. A priori power analyses in G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) based on the most complex models described in the Data Analytic Plan indicated that a sample size of approximately 215 would be necessary to detect medium effects (odds ratios of 3.5) with α at .05 and power at .80. At each site, all children in the target age

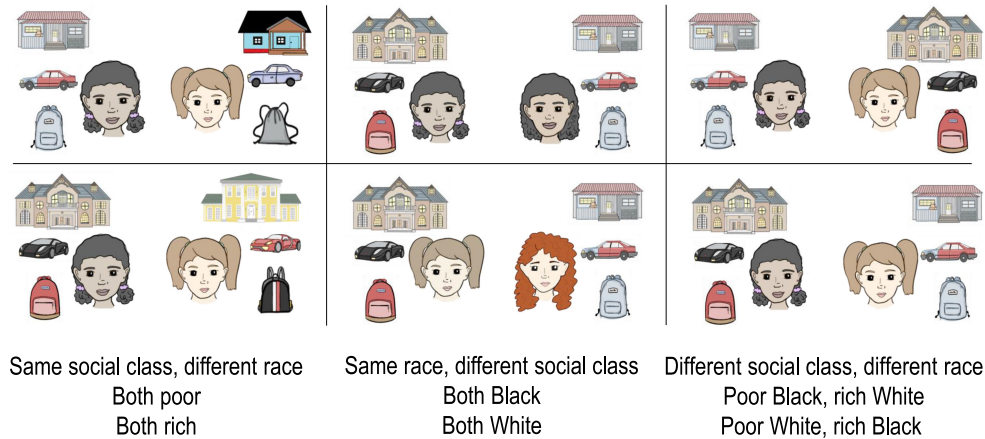


FIGURE 1 Experimental conditions

range were invited to participate via direct contact with members of the study team. The total study N exceeds the required sample size estimate because not all participants are included in every statistical model (depending on their condition) and because not all parents provided complete demographic information for their children, increasing the overall sample size necessary for exploratory tests related to child group memberships.

As outlined in Table 1, the sample was relatively balanced by child gender and relatively representative of the region in terms of child race and ethnicity as well as family SES. In 2019, U.S. Census data indicated that the median annual family income in the area was \$72,653 and 41% of adults had a Bachelor's degree or higher. In the same year, the racial and ethnic demographics of children (under 18) in the region included 65% White, 21% Black, 7% multiracial, 4% Asian, 3% another background, and across these groups, 14% Latinx (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Thus, relative to the region, the sample included slightly more multiracial children, slightly fewer Black children, and more children whose parents held a Bachelor's degree or higher.

Procedure

This study was approved by the Research Subjects Review Board at the University of Rochester; STUDY00001471: Children's Perceptions of Fairness. Parent consent and child assent were obtained for all participants. Children were individually interviewed for approximately 10 min by student Research Assistants at the sites of recruitment in the spring, summer, and fall of 2019. Materials included digital illustrations, stickers, and paper data collection sheets. Participants were not compensated.

Measures

All participants were randomized into one of six between-subjects conditions. In two conditions they saw

illustrated peers who shared the same social class but were from different racial backgrounds; either both were poor or both were rich. In two conditions they saw peers who shared the same race but were from different social class backgrounds; either both were Black or both were White. In two conditions they saw peers who were from different social class and different racial backgrounds; either the poor peer was Black and the rich peer was White or the poor peer was White and the rich peer was Black.

Skin tone and hair color were used to indicate race while family possessions (houses, cars, and backpacks) of different size and quality were used to indicate social class, consistent with research on early social categorization based on race (Dunham et al., 2015) and social class (Shutts et al., 2016). Stimuli were designed to reflect the region of the United States where the data were collected. Peer gender was matched to participant gender. Figure 1 displays an example of all six conditions. Complete stimuli and measures are available on OSF: <https://osf.io/8qbw7/>.

Participants were evenly distributed between conditions. Randomization did not differ by child age, gender, race or ethnicity, family income, or parent education. Within each condition, measure order was randomized between subjects.

Perceptions of peers' access to resources

Participants were asked: "Which kid has more toys at home?" As outlined in the Data Analytic Plan below, testing for differences in responses across all six conditions required running two parallel models for each set of hypotheses. In conditions where social class was contrasted, choosing the rich peer was coded as 1 and choosing the poor peer was coded as 0. In conditions where race was contrasted, choosing the White peer was coded as 1 and choosing the Black peer was coded as 0.



Social group preferences based on social class and race

Participants were asked: “Which kid do you like more?” As above, in conditions where social class was contrasted, choosing the rich peer was coded as 1 and choosing the poor peer was coded as 0. In conditions where race was contrasted, choosing the White peer was coded as 1 and choosing the Black peer was coded as 0.

Resource distribution and reasoning

Participants were asked to distribute five stickers between the two peers and explain their reasoning for their decision: “Can you show me how you want to give out [these five stickers]? Can you tell me why you gave [X to this kid and Y to this kid]?” Across conditions, between 86% and 88% of participants distributed three stickers to one peer and two to the other. Given the restricted range, we recoded this variable from its original 0 to 5 scale. As above, distributing more to the rich peer or the White peer was coded as 1 and distributing more to the poor peer or the Black peer was coded as 0.

Participants’ reasoning was coded into one of nine conceptual categories reflecting three overarching themes (Fairness, Social Preferences, and Stereotypes) from the SRD model (Killen & Rutland, 2011). Table 2 presents all categories, their definitions, and examples of reasoning from each. Responses that did not fit any category were coded as “Other” and excluded from analyses. Coding was conducted by two of the authors, both of whom joined the study after data collection and reasoning transcription were complete. They were briefed on the hypotheses only after coding was complete. They coded each response together, based on the definitions in Table 2, and discussed any ambiguities until a single, final code was reached for each response.

The categories Equity, Equality, Inequity, Social Class Preferences, Race Preferences, Personal Preferences, and Social Class Stereotypes were expected a priori based on prior research from the SRD perspective (e.g., Burkholder et al., 2021; Elenbaas, 2019; Elenbaas et al., 2016; McGuire et al., 2018) and closely related research in the field (e.g., Essler & Paulus, 2021; Mandalaywala et al., 2021; Mistry et al., 2015; Renno & Shutts, 2015). The coding system also originally contained a code for Race Stereotypes, but no participants referenced this category, so it was omitted. Finally, the coders identified two additional categories that were added post hoc: Item Preferences and Trait Stereotypes (see Table 2).

Child group memberships

Age

Parents reported their child's age in years, from 3 to 11 years.

Race

Parents reported their child's race or ethnicity using a list with a request to “check all that apply” and the option to write in an identity. Child race or ethnicity was coded as 1 = White children and 0 = Children of color (grouped together, i.e., children whose parents reported that they were Black, Asian, Latinx, multiracial or multiethnic, or another background). A dichotomous grouping is not ideal. However, it allowed for the inclusion of as many participants as possible in the exploratory analyses pertaining to child group memberships and acknowledged the possibility of variability across groups. For example, prior research on US children's social group preferences for Black and White peers suggests that White children's preferences (for White peers) are often stable across contexts but Black, Asian, Latinx, and multiracial-multiethnic children's preferences often differ (e.g., Mandalaywala et al., 2021; Newheiser & Olson, 2012). As noted in the hypotheses section, all tests for potential differences by child race or ethnicity were considered exploratory for this study.

SES

Parents reported their highest level of education on a scale from 1 = high school graduate to 4 = graduate degree, and their approximate annual family income on a scale from 1 = <\$25,000 to 8 = >\$200,000. Parent education and family income were correlated at $r = .55$, $p < .001$. Reflecting the demographics of the research site, the parents of White participants reported higher family incomes $r = .45$, $p < .001$ and higher educational attainment $r = .40$, $p < .001$, on average, than the parents of participants of color (grouped together). There is no single consensus measure of SES in the developmental literature (Diemer et al., 2013). We used parent education as the family SES variable in our analyses because it is associated with views on equity in adolescence (Flanagan et al., 2014; Kornbluh et al., 2019). As noted in the hypotheses section, all tests for potential differences by family SES (parent education) were considered exploratory for this study. Table 3 also includes bivariate correlations for family income and all study variables.

Gender

Parents reported their child's gender by checking “boy,” “girl,” or writing in an identity.

Data analytic plan

Analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS 27 (IBM). First, we inspected the data for potential curvilinear age effects (of particular interest for all hypotheses about age differences). For participants’ perceptions of peers’ access to resources, social group preferences based on social class and race, and resource distribution decisions, we conducted likelihood ratio (LR) χ^2

TABLE 2 Reasoning coding system

Category	Definition	Examples
Fairness (<i>n</i> = 68, 21%)		
Equity (<i>n</i> = 32, 9%)	References to rectifying differential access to resources	<p>“Since [poor Black peer] seems like she has less things than [rich Black peer], I gave to her”</p> <p>“This kid looks like he has everything and this kid looks like he doesn't have a lot”</p> <p>“Because she probably has more toys and stuff already”</p>
Equality (<i>n</i> = 24, 7%)	References to equal resource distribution between peers	<p>“Because I wanted them to be equal”</p> <p>“If I had more I would give three to each”</p> <p>“Trying to give them an equal amount”</p>
Inequity (<i>n</i> = 12, 3%)	References to maintaining differential access to resources	<p>“Because he has a bunch of special stuff rich people have and he has stuff to survive with”</p> <p>“[Poor White peer] have the least and [rich Black peer] have the most”</p> <p>“[Rich Black peer] looks richer than [poor Black peer]”</p>
Social preferences (<i>n</i> = 129, 39%)		
Social class preferences (<i>n</i> = 27, 8%)	References to preferences based on social class group membership	<p>“Because he is better because he has a bigger house”</p> <p>“Cuz he lives in a mansion and has a Lamborghini and has a cooler backpack”</p> <p>“[Rich Black peer] has better stuff and I like that”</p>
Race preferences (<i>n</i> = 3, 1%)	References to preferences based on racial group membership	<p>“She is a Black girl just like me”</p> <p>“Sometimes my family has white skin”</p>
Personal preferences (<i>n</i> = 49, 15%)	References to social preferences in general	<p>“Cuz I like him more”</p> <p>“Because I like [rich White peer] and I like [poor Black peer] not that much”</p>
Item preferences (<i>n</i> = 50, 15%)	References to preferences for specific material items (no explicit mention of group membership)	<p>“Cuz I like the house and the car”</p> <p>“I like her backpack”</p> <p>“Because he has that car”</p>
Stereotypes (<i>n</i> = 55, 17%)		
Social class stereotypes (<i>n</i> = 28, 8%)	References to traits stereotypically associated with social class groups	<p>“I know that rich people think they are better so I wanted to give not more stickers to the rich person to show that she is not better”</p> <p>“[Rich Black peer] would be more greedy because of the conditions she's living in”</p> <p>“Poor people are not as sassy and don't want as much stuff. They appreciate things more”</p>
Trait stereotypes (<i>n</i> = 27, 8%)	References to positive or negative traits (no explicit mention of group membership)	<p>“Because she looks a little friendlier and nicer”</p> <p>“This guy looks spoiled and bratty”</p>

Note: Other (*n* = 80, 24%); total (*n* = 348, 100%).

tests assessing improvement in fit between a model containing the intercept and a linear effect for age and the same model with an additional quadratic effect for age. Two tests were significant: social group preferences and resource distribution decisions in conditions where social class was contrasted; LR $\chi^2(1) = 13.04$, $p < .001$ and LR $\chi^2(1) = 6.33$, $p = .01$, respectively. Quadratic effects for age were retained for these two models. Second, although we had no a priori hypotheses about child gender in this study, we checked it as a potential covariate. Associations were few and inconsistent and the inclusion or omission of child gender did not change the pattern of significance for any of the results; it was not retained as a covariate. Finally, we checked intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) for shared variance by recruitment site. ICCs were low; site was not included in the final models.

To test our hypotheses, we used generalized linear models with a binomial probability distribution and logit link function to assess participants' perceptions of peers' access to resources, social group preferences based on social class and race, and resource distribution decisions. We used χ^2 tests to assess participants' reasoning. All models tested the between-subjects effects of Child Age, Condition, Child Race (exploratory), Family SES (i.e., parent education; exploratory), and the interactions of all child variables (Age, Race, SES) with Condition. LR χ^2 tests are provided as indices of model fit. Odds ratios (ORs) are provided as indices of effect size. Standard errors (SEs) and confidence intervals (CIs) are provided as indices of point estimate precision, and all CIs reported are 95% CIs. All follow-up comparisons were conducted with Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons.

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Child age	345	6.75	2.38	3	11										
2. Child gender	256	0.41	0.49	0	1	.04									
3. Child race	256	0.63	0.48	0	1	.10	-.05								
4. Family income	238	4.63	2.05	1	8	.07	-.03	.45***							
5. Parent education	248	3.95	1.06	1	4	-.02	-.07	.40***	.55***						
6. Resource access: social class	223	0.83	0.37	0	1	.35***	-.06	.01	.08	.09					
7. Resource access: race	223	0.54	0.50	0	1	-.19**	-.11	.02	.02	-.03	-.20*				
8. Social preferences: social class	224	0.57	0.50	0	1	-.17*	.06	-.04	-.09	-.06	.06	.10			
9. Social preferences: race	220	0.60	0.49	0	1	-.12	.06	.05	.06	.12	-.12	.05	-.14		
10. Resource distribution: social class	226	0.50	0.50	0	1	-.22**	-.11	-.08	-.08	.00	.00	.04	.42**	-.12	
11. Resource distribution: race	231	0.53	0.50	0	1	-.13*	-.04	-.18*	-.01	.02	.20	-.03	-.14	.34**	-.14

Note: Child gender 1 = boy, Child race 1 = White. Resource access: Social class 1 = Rich peer has more, Resource access: Race 1 = White peer has more. Social preferences: Social class 1 = prefer rich peer, Social preferences: Race 1 = prefer white peer. Resource distribution: Social class 1 = more to rich peer, Resource distribution: Race 1 = more to White peer.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

RESULTS

The following sections report the results of the models described in the Data Analytic Plan. Table 3 displays descriptive statistics and correlations for all study variables.

Perceptions of peers' access to resources

Participants associated social class and access to resources, LR $\chi^2(15) = 35.40$, $p = .002$. As illustrated in Figure 2, the older the child the more strongly they believed that rich peers had more toys at home than poor peers, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 13.14$, $p < .001$, $b = .75$ [0.05, 1.44], $p = .04$, OR = 2.11 [1.05, 4.23]. When both peers shared the same social class, participants also associated race and access to resources, LR $\chi^2(15) = 63.47$, $p < .001$. When both were poor, participants said that the White peer had more toys than the Black peer ($M = 0.59$, $SE = .09$ and $M = 0.64$, $SE = .10$), but the association decreased with age when both were rich, $b = -.36$ [-0.67, -0.05], $p = .03$, OR = 0.70 [0.51, 0.96].

Thus, even young children thought that rich peers had greater access to resources, and by late childhood nearly all participants made this assumption. Yet, when both peers were poor, participants at all ages thought that White peers had more, and young children thought the same when both peers were rich.

Social group preferences based on social class and race

Participants expressed social class group preferences, LR $\chi^2(19) = 52.07$, $p < .001$. The direction of these preferences nearly reversed with age, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 10.53$, $p = .001$, $b = -.19$ [-0.37, -0.01], $p = .04$, OR = 0.83 [0.69, 0.99]. As illustrated in Figure 3, on average, young children showed no preference, participants in middle childhood preferred rich peers, and older children chose poor peers. Although participants reported a slight average preference for White peers over Black peers, $M = 0.60$,

$SD = 0.49$, binomial $p = .006$, it did not differ significantly based on age, LR $\chi^2(15) = 25.25$, $p = .05$.

Thus, although a slight preference for White peers persisted for the full age range, participants in middle childhood distinctly preferred rich peers and older children avoided choosing rich peers.

Resource distribution decisions and reasoning

Resource distribution

Participants distributed resources differently based on peer social class, LR $\chi^2(19) = 56.92$, $p < .001$. The direction of these differences nearly reversed with age. As illustrated in Figure 4, young children did not distribute differentially, participants in middle childhood distributed more to the rich peer, and older children distributed more to the poor peer, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 5.94$, $p = .01$, $b = -.23$ [-0.39, -0.06], $p = .007$, OR = 0.80 [0.68, 0.94]. These age differences were most pronounced when both peers were Black, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 7.33$, $p = .007$, $b = -.23$ [-0.39, -0.06], $p = .007$, OR = 0.80 [0.68, 0.94], or the poor peer was White and the rich peer was Black, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 4.22$, $p = .04$, $b = -.20$ [-0.39, -0.01], $p = .04$, OR = 0.82 [0.68, 0.99].

Participants also distributed resources differently based on peer race, LR $\chi^2(15) = 28.14$, $p = .02$. As illustrated in Figure 4, the older the child the less likely they were to distribute more resources to the White peer, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 6.01$, $p = .01$, $b = -.13$ [-0.45, .18], $p = .04$, OR = 0.88 [0.64, 1.20]. This age difference was strongest when the poor peer was Black and the rich peer was White, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 5.75$, $p = .02$, $b = -.74$ [-1.34, -0.14], $p = .02$, OR = 0.48 [0.26, 0.87].

Thus, children's resource distributions were informed by both peer social class and peer race in ways that differed with age. Overall, young children distributed more to White peers, especially if they were also rich. Participants in middle childhood favored rich peers. Older children distributed more to poor peers.

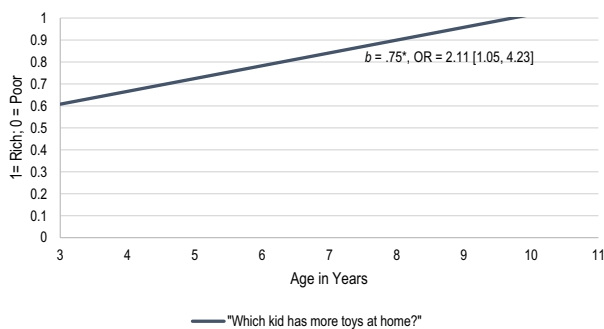


FIGURE 2 Perceptions of peers' access to resources. Note: $*p < .05$. OR = odds ratio [95% confidence interval]

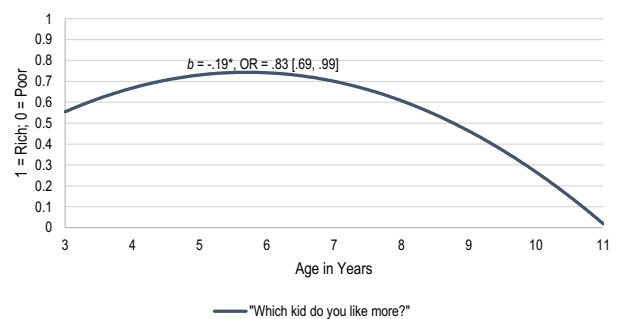


FIGURE 3 Social group preferences based on social class and race. Note: $*p < .05$. OR = odds ratio [95% confidence interval]

Reasoning

Participants' reasoning differed with age, $\chi^2(16) = 93.06$, $p < .001$. As illustrated in Figure 5, reasoning about Equity ($M = 0.07$, $M = 0.10$, $M = 0.22$), Social Class Stereotypes ($M = 0.02$, $M = 0.07$, $M = 0.26$), and Trait Stereotypes ($M = 0.02$, $M = 0.12$, $M = 0.16$) increased with age. By contrast, reasoning about Personal Preferences decreased with age ($M = 0.47$, $M = 0.15$, $M = 0.05$). Reasoning about Social Class Preferences first increased between early ($M = 0.02$) and middle ($M = 0.20$) childhood, then decreased between middle and late ($M = 0.03$) childhood. All reported differences were significant at $ps < .05$.

Thus, young children often referenced general personal preferences (e.g., "I like this one the best"), and participants in middle childhood often expressed explicit preferences for the rich (e.g., "He is better because he has a bigger house"). Some older children referenced

concerns for equity (e.g., "This kid [...] looks like he doesn't have a lot"), whereas others referenced stereotypes about the rich (e.g., "Rich people think they are better [...]").

DISCUSSION

Informed by the SRD model (Killen & Rutland, 2011), this study investigated 3- to 11-year-old US children's perceptions of peers' access to resources, social group preferences, resource distribution decisions, and reasoning across six conditions in which peers differed in social class and race. The results make new contributions in two primary areas. First, they revealed marked age differences in perceptions, preferences, decisions, and reasoning about social class, race, and fairness during childhood. Overall, younger participants' responses often seemed to reinforce broader social inequalities while older children often resisted and sought to create more equity, but not always for moral reasons. Second, beyond single social categories, this study identified specific combinations of social class and racial group memberships (among hypothetical peers) that were especially likely to receive preferential treatment at different ages.

Some of the most striking age differences pertained to children's social group preferences. Specifically, young children showed mixed social class and racial group preferences, participants in middle childhood distinctly preferred rich peers, and participants in late childhood expressed dislike for rich peers. Prior research pointed to in-group preferences among more affluent children and White children and mixed preferences among less

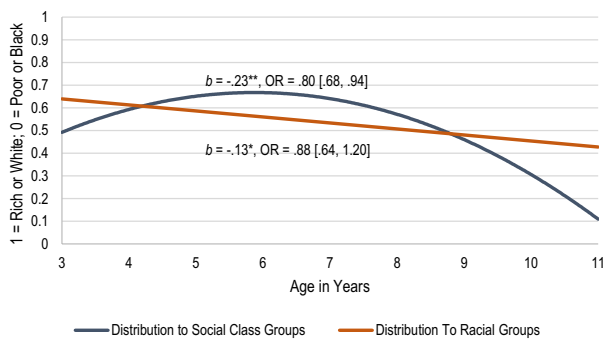


FIGURE 4 Resource distribution. Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. OR = odds ratio [95% confidence interval]

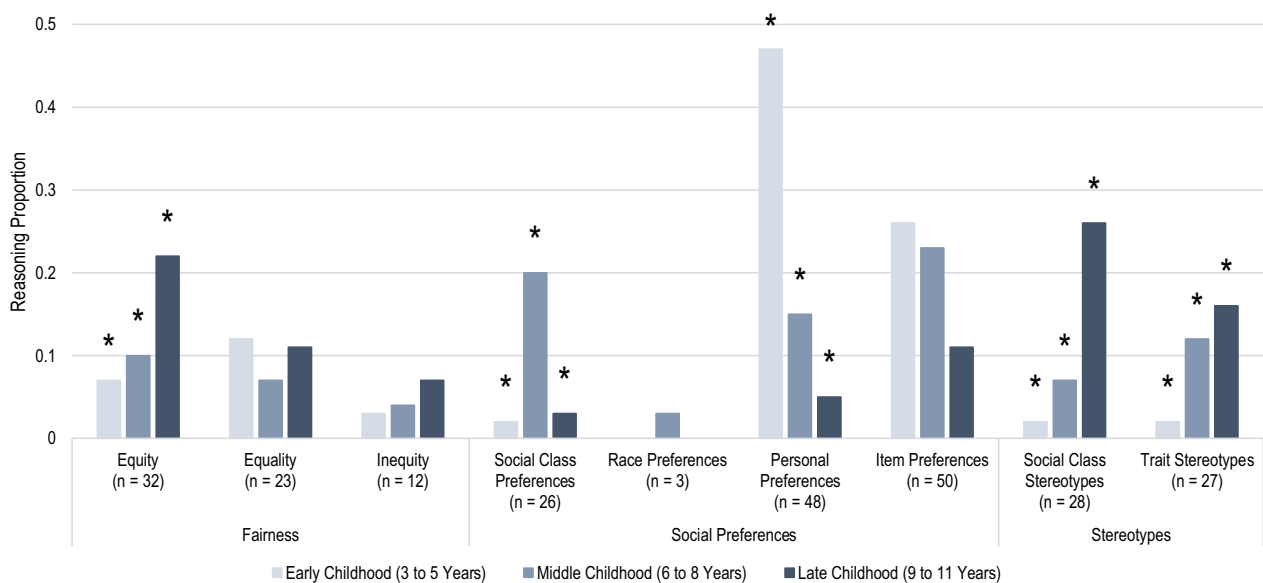


FIGURE 5 Resource distribution reasoning. Note: * $p < .05$. Ns in parentheses beneath each category are across the full sample

affluent children and Black children (e.g., Shutts et al., 2016), but this study directly tested the combined effects of both group memberships and found that social class group preferences largely overtook racial group preferences by middle childhood.

Reflecting these shifts in social group preferences, young children distributed more resources to White peers, especially if they were also rich, and reasoned about their own personal preferences (e.g., “I like him more”) but participants in middle childhood distributed more to rich peers and reasoned about their social class group preferences (e.g., “[She] has better stuff and I like that”). One interpretation is that, by middle childhood, participants were becoming aware of broader US national narratives that esteem the rich and chastise the poor (Mistry et al., 2021). Another interpretation is that children's early concepts of social class were primarily material. Many participants in middle childhood reasoned about the material indicators of peers' social class (e.g., “I like that house and car”). Older children's reasoning, by contrast, revealed a more psychological concept of social class (e.g., “Rich people think they're better [..]”). Most likely, in middle childhood, both emerging notions of societal status and associations with fun resources were involved, contributing to the high rates of preference for, and preferential distribution to, rich peers.

With age, social class group preferences nearly reversed such that, when asked which kid they liked more, older children frequently chose poor peers. Older children's reasoning, however, primarily revealed a dislike for rich peers rather than a sense of liking, similarity, or belonging with poor peers (e.g., “She might be more mean because she's rich”). One potential reason for this shift is that, as they reach late childhood, US children begin to perceive the middle class as the culturally defined “normal” social class group (Mistry et al., 2015) and begin to stereotype rich and poor peers differently depending on the context. For instance, stereotypes about rich peers as aloof and exclusive also emerge in older children's reasoning about peer social exclusion (e.g., Burkholder et al., 2020). The context of the current study, emphasizing affiliation and resource sharing, likely evoked older children's stereotypes about rich peers as greedy and snobby and poor peers as generous and humble.

Finally, older children distributed more resources to poor peers, and primarily reasoned about either moral concerns for equity (e.g., “This kid looks like he has everything and this kid looks like he doesn't have a lot”) or social class stereotypes (e.g., “Poor people are not as sassy and don't want as much stuff, they appreciate things more”). This is important because, in contrast to prior work emphasizing equity reasoning in late childhood (e.g., Elenbaas, 2019), these findings show two distinct rationales underlying the same distribution behavior among older children in this study. This underscores the coexistence of concerns for morality and group identity

across development and suggests the potential emergence of group or inter-individual differences in older children's prioritization or application of these concerns in context.

Importantly, alongside differing attention to peer social class with age, attention to peer race was evident at every point in development. In particular, although rich peers were clearly perceived to have greater access to resources than poor peers, participants who saw two poor peers perceived that the White peer had more toys than the Black peer did. Prior research focused on relative comparisons (e.g., Mandalaywala et al., 2020), but findings from the current study showed that children believed wealth confers access to resources—both Black and White rich peers were equally likely to have lots of toys. Poverty, however, was perceived differently; poor Black peers were perceived as “poorer” (in toys) than poor White peers were.

Limitations and future directions

There are four primary limitations to this study that point to important directions for continued investigation. First, although the sample demographics reflected a range of racial and ethnic diversity and family SES, there were more White children than children of other racial or ethnic backgrounds in the sample, and more children whose parents reported middle or higher SES than lower SES. Future research must assess how these attitudes and decisions may differ across children who reflect a wider range of racial, ethnic, and social class diversity. This study and others (e.g., Elenbaas & Mistry, 2021) suggest that late childhood may be when consistent group differences begin to clearly emerge in children's prioritization of multiple social group and fairness concerns in distributive justice contexts.

Second, although the study included six conditions to reflect combinations of social class and racial group memberships, it did not test children's attitudes about middle class peers. By parent SES report, many of the participants would be considered middle class for the area, and many likely personally identified as middle class (Mistry et al., 2015). These children saw only social class outgroup members (i.e., rich and poor peers) in the stimuli. An important next step toward fully contrasting the intergroup effects of social class and race in distributive justice contexts should be to include a middle class group.

Third, this study assessed children's attitudes toward peers who differed in social class and race with an additive design. Developmental scientists applying intersectionality theory have highlighted that the effects of multiple systems of privilege and oppression are neither additive (e.g., the effects of being a girl plus the effects of being White) nor reducible (e.g., the effects of being a girl outweigh the effects of being White). Rather, multiple

social hierarchies intertwine to shape children's experiences of privilege and marginalization in specific ways (Ghavami et al., 2016; Santos & Toomey, 2018). Future research would benefit from investigating attitudes about specific groups with theoretically relevant intersectional social experiences.

Finally, although this study included participants from a wide age range (3 to 11 years), further longitudinal research is necessary to examine developmental changes. For example, one recent study found that 4-year-olds who initially endorsed essentialist/internal explanations for racial wealth inequalities chose (hypothetical) Black peers as playmates less and less often over 6 months (Rizzo et al., 2021). Likewise, children's perceptions of peers' access to resources may constitute an informational assumption (Wainryb, 1991) that, over time, may inform moral judgements and decisions about equity. Additionally, observational studies would be useful to investigate how similar behaviors manifest in children's naturalistic interactions (e.g., sharing), and parent- or teacher-reports (e.g., rates of intergroup play) would provide important converging evidence for the age changes and condition differences revealed in this study.

In sum, this study investigated 3- to 11-year-old US children's perceptions of access to resources, social group preferences, and resource distribution decisions and reasoning across six conditions in which hypothetical peers differed in social class, race, or both group memberships. While younger children's responses often seemed to reflect broader social inequalities, older children often rejected them, although their reasoning revealed a mix of moral concerns for equity and social group stereotypes.

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How to cite this article: Elenbaas, L., Luken Raz, K., Ackerman, A., & Kneeskern, E. (2022). “This kid looks like he has everything”: 3- to 11-year-old children's concerns for fairness and social preferences when peers differ in social class and race. *Child Development*, 00, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13778>