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SOCIAL INEQUALITIES AND MORALITY

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Social inequalities occur when resources and opportunities are unjustly distributed between groups in society. Because they harm people's relationships, learning, and health and because they reflect injustice, inequity, and denial of rights, social inequalities are moral issues (Turiel et al., 2016). As a part of understanding the societies that they live in, children and adolescents actively think about the social inequalities that they encounter 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 (Ruck et al., 2019). In fact, as active agents interpreting their social world, children and adolescents are afforded many opportunities to either reject, reinforce, or ignore social inequalities through their own interpersonal reasoning, judgments, and decision-making (Elenbaas et al., 2020). This chapter offers a moral developmental perspective covering what we currently know about when, how, and why children and adolescents change and differ in their reasoning about causes, consequences, and courses of action in interpersonal situations that reflect social inequalities.

Around the world, infants, children, and adolescents are growing up in societies marked by increasing social inequality (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). In the U.S., many social inequalities divide people along racial/ethnic and socioeconomic lines. For example, a larger proportion of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous families experience restricted access to well-paying jobs, safe housing, quality education, health care, and political representation relative to their White or Asian peers (Semega et al., 2019). Interpersonal interactions can perpetuate social inequalities because people are immersed in these inequitable social systems (Roberts & Rizzo, 2020). For instance, social class and racial stereotypes emerge early in development and contribute to peer discrimination (Brown, 2017). Children and adolescents experiencing discrimination are at increased risk for emotional, behavioral, and academic challenges (Benner et al., 2018).

Yet when children and adolescents reason about social inequalities as morally unjust, they often see interpersonal and societal change as necessary (Killen & Dahl, 2021). For instance, children who reject stereotypes are more inclusive in their friendships (Killen & Rutland, 2011) and adolescents who feel empowered to address social inequalities in their communities fare better both emotionally and academically (Diemer et al., 2021). Because social inequalities are moral issues that involve social groups, understanding developing reasoning about social inequality benefits from an integrative theoretical approach.

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Social Reasoning Developmental Model

One branch of current research in this area is informed by the social reasoning developmental (SRD) model (Killen & Rutland, 2011). The SRD model draws on social domain theory (Turiel, 1983) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to provide an integrative framework for understanding how children and adolescents 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 children's reasoning about morality, group identity, and the psychological states of others (Rutland et al., 2010). Research questions developed from an SRD perspective often ask when, how, and why reasoning about morality and group identity *change* across childhood and adolescence; how children at any given age may *coordinate* these potentially competing concerns; and how developmental changes and coordination patterns may *differ* across different intergroup identities and contexts.

In seeking to make sense of social inequalities, children and adolescents must grapple with their moral concerns for fairness, justice, and rights in contexts that also evoke intergroup attitudes such as stereotypes and prejudice (Elenbaas et al., 2020). For example, research from the perspective of social domain theory has demonstrated that children recognize denying access to shared resources as unfair for moral reasons (Smetana et al., 2014). Yet research from the perspective of social identity development theory has demonstrated that children sort people in the social groups of "us" and "them" and seek a positive status for their in-group (Nesdale, 2004). When they view resource inequalities as unfair, children often take steps to rectify them—for instance, by reallocating resources between peers, including previously excluded peers in an opportunity, or advocating for changes to authority figures' (e.g., teachers') inequitable policies (Killen et al., 2018). Yet under certain intergroup conditions, children create and reinforce inequalities by withholding resources or opportunities from out-groups, excluding peers based on group stereotypes, or simply remaining silent when faced with discriminatory policies (Killen et al., 2017).

Emerging research on social inequality framed by the SRD model offers insights into developing beliefs about social inequalities and the lines of reasoning that help children question, critique, and even begin to counteract parallel inequalities that are within their power to change (Elenbaas et al., 2020). This chapter draws on research from the SRD perspective and related research in this area to outline what we currently know about children's and adolescents' reasoning, judgments, and decisions in intergroup peer situations that reflect social inequalities when multiple moral and social issues are at stake.

Reasoning about Distributive Justice

Social inequalities involve *unjust distributions of resources and opportunities* based on group membership. From the perspective of social domain theory, fairness, justice, and rights are foundational moral concerns for both children and adults. In fact, even young children recognize that taking someone else's resources (e.g., stealing a peer's toy) or monopolizing resources in everyday contexts (e.g., hoarding all the snacks for oneself) is unfair, alongside other unfair actions like inflicting physical (e.g., hitting) or psychological (e.g., teasing) harm (Smetana & Ball, 2019).

More broadly, distributive justice refers to the principles used to allocate resources and opportunities among people in a society, including (but not limited to) principles of equality, merit, and need. Developmentally, young children (ages 3 to 5 years) often distribute items such as toys equally among third parties and judge that others should do the same, on the basis that equal distribution of shared resources is fair (Elenbaas, 2019b; Rizzo & Killen, 2016). In middle childhood (6 to 8 years), children begin to consistently recognize principles of merit and equity, distributing more resources to those who work harder or demonstrate greater need (Schmidt et al., 2016; Smith & Warneken, 2016).

By late childhood (9 to 11 years), children are able to flexibly apply multiple distributive principles in peer contexts, taking into account the number and type of resources available, the degree of peers' contribution or need, and the implications of different distribution strategies (Essler & Paulus, 2021). For example, Rizzo and colleagues (2016) investigated 3- to 8-year-old children's decisions about how to distribute a resource described as either necessary for health or a luxury meant for having fun. Older children allocated more luxury resources to a hardworking recipient and reasoned about merit (e.g., "She should get more because she worked hard") but allocated necessary resources equally between two recipients and reasoned about the implications for recipients' welfare (e.g., "They'll get very sick if they don't get any").

Thus, children's beliefs about what constitutes distributive fairness gain strength and context-specificity across childhood (and into adolescence). Conceptually, children's capacity to reason about equality, merit, and equity are essential to their understanding of social inequalities. Becoming aware of social inequalities involves recognizing that resources and opportunities are not equally distributed, assumptions about merit often underlie stereotypes about the causes of social inequalities, and recognition of equity is a necessary step toward rectifying inequalities.

Reasoning About Social Groups

Returning to the definition: social inequalities involve unjust distributions of resources and opportunities *based on group membership*. Research drawing on social identity development theory (Nesdale, 2004) and developmental intergroup theory (Bigler & Liben, 2007) has investigated children's stereotypes and prejudice about social groups, including (but not limited to) race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, language, and social class. Much of the research described in this chapter addresses social inequalities involving race and social class in the U.S.. Both are complex constructs, and both terms connote hierarchy, in which some groups consider other groups inferior.

Young children (3 to 5 years) first begin to classify others into social categories based on external, observable features, such as skin tone and hair color for race and the quantity and quality of material possessions for social class (Shutts, 2015). Once social categories are established, children seek to explain category distinctions, and their environment often offers implicit or explicit stereotypic explanations. In turn, children's beliefs about social categories grow stronger as they begin to use stereotypes to make inferences about others (Bigler & Liben, 2007). By middle childhood, many U.S. children believe that rich people are smarter and work harder than poor people (Shutts et al., 2016), and many White children hold stereotypes that White people are smarter and more responsible than Black people (Pauker et al., 2016). By early adolescence, U.S. youth expect White and Asian peers to be wealthier than Black and Latinx peers (Ghavami & Mistry, 2019) and stereotype Asian students as more intelligent than students of other backgrounds (Ghavami & Peplau, 2018).

Many of these stereotypes imply that social inequalities are the result of group differences in intelligence, motivation, or responsibility rather than structural issues, such as differential access to education or jobs. Older children (9 to 11 years) often agree with structural explanations for social inequalities when they are posed (e.g., "Poor people have fewer chances to get ahead") (Rapa et al., 2020), and many reason about basic structural issues such as racial discrimination when asked to explain the causes of social inequalities (Elenbaas & Killen, 2017). Yet even in adolescence, the awareness of structural issues exists alongside persistent stereotypes that social inequalities reflect group differences in effort and competence (Seider et al., 2019).

Thus, the capacity to reason about social groups emerges in early childhood, and with increasing age and social experience, U.S. children's beliefs about race, social class, and merit, in particular, often suggest that social inequalities are acceptable. Yet as detailed later in this chapter, being "group neutral" is not an effective solution. Children and adolescents can (and do) take group membership into account in order to advocate for equity.

When, How, and Why Children Perpetuate Social Inequalities in Interpersonal Interactions

Children's decisions to withhold resources or opportunities, exclude or harass peers based on stereotypes, or simply remain silent when faced with discriminatory policies serve to reinforce social inequalities in interpersonal contexts. Research from the SRD perspective has demonstrated that children are more likely to judge social inequalities as acceptable—as conventionally expected, normal, or desirable—(1) when they are not aware of their true magnitude, (2) when their social groups benefit from existing disparities, (3) when the norms in their context condone inequality, or (4) when they hold stereotypes that rationalize social inequalities (Elenbaas et al., 2020). Awareness, benefits, norms, and stereotypes, in turn, often change across development and differ across groups and contexts.

Perceiving Inequality

As previously noted, children often reason that people who work harder should receive a greater share of the rewards. However, this reasoning often overlooks whether the playing field was level to begin with. For example, Elenbaas (2019d) investigated judgments about resource distribution based on opportunity and outcome with a sample of racially/ethnically and socioeconomically diverse 5- to 7-year-old children. Participants were introduced to two peers who were coloring with the promise of receiving gummy bears for each picture completed. One peer had many more crayons, was able to complete more pictures, and thus received more gummy bears. Children who reasoned about merit (41%; e.g., "He colored more pictures, so he deserves more gummy bears") endorsed this resource distribution as acceptable, whereas children who reasoned about opportunity (16%; e.g., "She didn't get to do five pictures because she didn't have five crayons") judged it as "not okay." Thus, even though all participants had clear evidence of unequal opportunity, only some children took it into consideration when determining whether the resource distribution outcome was fair.

Relative to children, adolescents make more accurately calibrated estimates of broad-scale resource and opportunity disparities in society but still typically underestimate the true magnitude of the issues. In the U.S., for example, Black, Latinx, and White adolescents across the economic spectrum believe that, on average, wealth should be more equally distributed in society than it currently is yet still underestimate the true size of wealth gaps (Arsenio & Willems, 2017; Flanagan & Kornbluh, 2019). Awareness of inequality is a prerequisite to addressing it, and raising awareness of the true size and scope of social inequalities may reduce the extent to which children and adolescents overlook them. Yet many other social and cognitive factors may still converge to allow disparities to remain and grow.

Group Status

If left unaddressed, the in-group biases of children who are members of groups considered higher in status can result in actions that reinforce social inequalities. Once social groups are established, children are motivated to maintain both their own in-group membership and the positive status of their in-group, and their environment often offers opportunities to do so by including, sharing with, and otherwise benefitting in-group members (Nesdale, 2004). Beginning in early childhood, children from middle- and higher-SES households report greater liking for peers depicted as wealthy than peers depicted as poor, while children from lower-SES households show more mixed social preferences (Shutts et al., 2016). At the same age, young White children tend to prefer and befriend other White children, while Black children show less consistent in-group or out-group peer affiliation or friendship preferences (Renno & Shutts, 2015).

In addition to in-group preferences, conditions suggesting competition or threat raise the probability of prejudice and discrimination (Nesdale et al., 2005). For instance, research from the SRD

perspective has shown that children typically judge it to be wrong (unfair and psychologically harmful) to exclude a peer from an activity based solely on their group membership (Killen & Rutland, 2011). However, when it is not possible to include everyone, girls, children of color, and children from lower-SES households often evaluate exclusion on the basis of gender (Park & Killen, 2010), race (Cooley et al., 2019), or social class (Burkholder et al., 2020) to be *more* wrong than do boys, White children, and children from higher-SES households. In other words, when resources or opportunities are limited, in-group preferences among children who are members of groups considered higher in status can result in actions that reinforce those social hierarchies.

Moreover, recent evidence from the SRD perspective suggests that relations between group status and the perpetuation of hierarchies may be causal. For example, Rizzo and Killen (2020) examined how 3- to 8-year-old children's experimentally assigned group status in a context of resource inequality predicted their judgments about that inequality. First, children were inducted into a fictional team that competed against another team in a game to earn prizes. While actual performance was held constant across conditions, participants were told that their team either won or lost the game and received a correspondingly large or small allocation of prizes. Across all ages, children who were told their team won the competition rated the prize distribution as fairer and were more supportive of hypothetical peers who wanted to keep giving more prizes to their team. Although older children (6 to 8 years) were more likely than younger children (3 to 5 years) to personally distribute extra prizes equally, distributions that actively rectified the disparity by directing more to the team that "lost" were rare.

Thus, children whose group experienced an arbitrary advantage not only endorsed resource distributions that benefited them but also allowed the disparity between groups to grow through their own and others' subsequent actions (Rizzo & Killen, 2020). In a similar vein, McGuire and colleagues (McGuire, Elenbaas, et al., 2019) found that 13- to 16-year-old adolescents who were told that their school had a material advantage over another school in an interschool arts competition kept slightly more boxes of "extra" art supplies for themselves rather than sharing with the school that had fewer supplies. Moreover, the more resources they kept, the more likely they were to reason about how the action would benefit their school team (e.g., "If they have less, it's too bad, we need the supplies to win").

Even when children do not stand to personally gain from acquiring more resources for themselves, seeing other in-group members benefit from an intergroup resource inequality can be enough for children to allow it to persist. For example, Elenbaas and colleagues (2016) randomly assigned 5- to 6-year-old Black and White children from middle-SES households to witness an experimental inequality of educational supplies in which schools serving members of their racial in-group either received more or fewer supplies than schools serving members of their racial out-group. Seventy-nine percent of children whose racial in-group received *fewer* supplies judged this arrangement to be "not okay," and 70% allocated a larger proportion of subsequent school supplies to their in-group, often reasoning about equity (e.g., "They didn't have more before, so I'm giving them more now"). By contrast, only 58% of children whose in-group received *more* supplies judged the inequality to be unacceptable, and only 44% took steps to correct it by dividing subsequent school supplies in favor of their out-group. Thus, children whose in-group was personally disadvantaged by a resource inequality generally viewed it as unfair and took steps to address it when they had the chance, while children whose in-group benefitted from the disparity were more neutral in their judgments and noncommittal in their behavior, allowing the resource disparity to persist (Elenbaas et al., 2016).

Together, these studies show that children's group status affects how they reason about, judge, and address resource inequalities in intergroup peer contexts. In both experimentally defined and everyday social contexts, when children perceive their social group(s) to be higher in status than other groups, they are more exclusive in their peer affiliations and more likely to ignore—or even reinforce—intergroup resource inequalities.

Group Norms

In addition to group status, group norms have an important influence on developing decisions about distributive justice in intergroup contexts, particularly in adolescence. For example, McGuire and colleagues (2019) experimentally placed ethnically diverse, middle-SES 8- and 13-year-olds into fictional teams for an arts competition and asked them to divide up money to purchase art supplies between the two teams. The teams, in turn, were described as sharing either competitive (get more money for our team) or cooperative (divide the money equally) norms. Within each team was a single individual who advocated for the opposite approach. When their group norm was cooperative and one person wanted to compete, 13-year-olds, but not 8-year-olds, approved of this individual. By contrast, when their group norm was competitive and one person wanted to collaborate, both older children and early adolescents approved of this individual. In line with the SRD perspective, these results point to early adolescents' sensitivity to their peer group's norms about distributive fairness and a more nuanced view that competition might be acceptable or even desirable when there are scarce resources in intergroup contexts (McGuire, Rizzo, et al., 2019).

Bringing together SRD research on group status and group norms, Elenbaas and Killen (2019) found that not only do early adolescents expect others to be competitive in intergroup contexts where opportunities are limited, but more affluent children are especially likely to expect this behavior in their peers. In this study, racially/ethnically diverse 8- to 14-year-olds from middle- to upper-middle-income backgrounds learned about a hypothetical summer camp in a nearby city and two groups of children, one described as wealthy and one described as poor, who all wanted to attend. There were not enough spaces to go around, and participants were asked how each group would want the camp to handle this situation. Most younger participants expected both groups to want the summer camp to split the spaces 50/50, but approximately 75% of 14-year-olds expected both groups to want all of the camps spaces for themselves. With age, participants also increasingly viewed the wealthy group, in particular, as motivated by selfishness, greediness, and entitlement (e.g., "They think because they're rich they can get what they want and they deserve everything"). Finally, across ages, participants whose parents reported higher incomes were more likely to expect both groups to seek opportunities for themselves alone.

These results align with research suggesting that feeling higher in status is associated with more competitive behavior in intergroup situations where there are not enough resources or opportunities to go around (McGuire, Elenbaas, et al., 2019). Similar stereotypes that the wealthy are snobby and exclusive have also been found in children's reasoning about peer social exclusion (Burkholder et al., 2020). However, negative stereotypes about peers from marginalized social groups are perhaps even more widespread (Hunt & Bullock, 2016) and have pernicious effects on children's interpersonal resource allocation decisions.

Negative Stereotypes about Marginalized Groups

As previously noted, assumptions about race, social class, and meritocracy serve to justify social inequalities in the U.S., placing the blame on the perceived internal shortcomings of individuals and groups rather than external systemic or structural factors. In fact, when asked to explain why some people are poor and others are rich, adolescents primarily cite differences in people's effort, motivation, and responsibility (Flanagan, 2013). Most research in this area has focused on developing stereotypes about social groups, but there is emerging evidence that older children (Elenbaas & Mistry, 2021) and adolescents (Godfrey et al., 2019) also tend to perceive U.S. social *systems* as just and meritocratic, agreeing with statements such as "America is the land of opportunity where everyone who works hard can get ahead."

Taken together, research from the SRD perspective and related research on developing attitudes about social inequality has demonstrated that children ignore or perpetuate social inequalities in

interpersonal contexts for at least four main reasons. First, many children and adolescents are not aware of the true scope of social inequalities in U.S. society. Second, although average awareness appears to increase with age, even highly aware children and adolescents may reason not to address a resource or opportunity inequality that benefits their social group(s), and they may choose instead to overlook or even reinforce existing disparities. Third, while these tendencies emerge in childhood, they can be further bolstered by peer group norms of competition or non-intervention to which adolescents are especially sensitive. Finally, U.S. children and adolescents are often immersed in social, educational, and political narratives promising that the country is a place of equal opportunity where hard work is rewarded with upward mobility (Jost et al., 2015). At present, however, neither opportunities nor outcomes are equal across social class and racial groups in the U.S. (Roberts & Rizzo, 2020). These hopeful narratives can turn into harmful stereotypes that excluded and marginalized groups "deserve" their status.

When, How, and Why Children Address Social Inequalities in Interpersonal Interactions

As children seek to understand the societies that they are a part of, critical evaluation of unjust social structures enables resistance (Turiel et al., 2016). Indeed, social domain theorists argue that moral reasoning is not only a natural part of human development but a key driver of social change (Killen & Dahl, 2021). Everyday people—children and adults—have the capacity to critique, resist, and protest injustices through their own interpersonal reasoning, judgments, and decision-making.

Research from the SRD perspective has demonstrated that, despite facing challenges, children and adolescents *often* take steps to rectify intergroup inequalities that are under their control. For example, they may reallocate resources that have been unjustly distributed between peers, include previously excluded peers in an opportunity, or advocate for changes to authority figures' (e.g., teachers') policies that they find inequitable. Thus far, this research has demonstrated that children and adolescents are more likely to judge social inequalities as wrong—as violations of moral principles of rights and fairness—(1) when they attribute them to discrimination and (2) when they are able to conceptualize their own decisions in light of broader social issues (that they view as wrong) (Elenbaas et al., 2020). Attributions and connections to society, in turn, often change across development and differ across groups and contexts.

Recognition of Discrimination

When children attribute resource inequalities to discrimination, they are more likely to reason about them as moral issues and try to correct disparities that are within their sphere of influence. For instance, in one recent study, Rizzo and colleagues (2020) tested how 3- to 8-year-old children responded when a group leader at a summer camp passed out prizes based on merit (i.e., more for those who "did a good job") or based on gender (i.e., more for those who shared the leader's gender group membership). When they had the opportunity to pass out more prizes themselves, most children distributed more to the hardworking peer in the first condition, reasoned about merit (e.g., "She did a better job at the camp activities"), and judged that it would be acceptable for someone else to respond the same way. By contrast, when resources had been unequally distributed on the basis of gender, most children gave out prizes equally or gave slightly more to the peer who had received less, reasoned about equality (e.g., "They should get the same number"), and judged that it would be acceptable for someone else to respond in the same way. Thus, when children had clear evidence of past discrimination on the part of the group leader, they often acted to correct the resource disparity that person created (Rizzo et al., 2020).

Similarly, Elenbaas and Killen (2017) investigated 10- and 11-year-old racially and ethnically diverse middle-SES children's explanations for situations involving resource disparities between

hypothetical schools and hospitals serving Black and White peers. In this study, 42% of children attributed the resource inequalities that they observed to economic differences (e.g., "The schools with more supplies are richer than the other schools with less"), 34% speculated that the institutions might have different needs (e.g., "The kids in those hospitals may have worse injuries than the others"), and 24% attributed the inequalities to discrimination directly (e.g., "Those hospitals are treated fairly but the others are not because of their race"). Children were almost twice as likely to suspect discrimination when the institutions receiving fewer resources served Black peers rather than White peers. Moreover, children who reasoned about discrimination were especially likely to judge the resource inequality as "not okay," revealing another link between awareness of discrimination and rejection of social inequalities. As one child put it, "They're judging people by the color of their skin and that's not right. Who is even running this city? That mayor should get fired."

Connecting Interpersonal and Societal Inequity

In addition to awareness of discrimination, older children (around 9 to 11 years) are increasingly conscious of multiple facets of broader social inequalities in their communities, which can, in turn, inform their decisions about distributive justice in intergroup contexts. For example, Elenbaas and Killen (2016) examined children's perceptions of racial wealth disparities and decisions about resource allocation with a sample of 5- to 6- and 10- to 11-year-old Black and White participants from middle-SES households. First, older children were more likely than younger children to associate White peers with items reflecting wealth and Black peers with items reflecting poverty (e.g., very large houses vs. very small houses), indicating age-related increases in perceptions of a racial wealth gap. Next, children were randomly assigned to observe an experimental inequality of health supplies in which hospitals serving White children received more supplies than hospitals serving Black children or vice versa. Older children judged both resource inequalities to be more wrong than younger children, and 23% of children who saw hospitals serving Black children receiving less reasoned about rights (e.g., "The other hospital will struggle more than the 'White' hospital, which is unfair and reminds us of civil rights time"). Finally, children evaluated resource distribution strategies that either perpetuated or rectified the disparity and decided how they personally wanted to distribute seven boxes of supplies. In the condition in which Black peers were excluded from access to resources, with age participants supported rectifying this inequality by directing more resources to the relevant hospitals and personally did so when they had the chance to distribute supplies. In fact, these changes were explained by the previously described increases in children's social perceptions of a racial wealth gap and moral judgments about the wrongfulness of the inequality. In the condition in which White peers were excluded from access to resources, participants divided supplies equally, demonstrating a different type of concern for fairness. Thus, older children were most likely to see an experimental resource inequality as relevant to others' rights and take proactive steps to rectify the disparity when it reflected existing social inequalities that they had observed in their society.

Using a similar experimental design, Elenbaas (2019a) assessed older children's and early adolescents' views on social class and access to opportunities, with a sample of racially and ethnically diverse 8- to 14-year-old's from middle- to upper-middle-income backgrounds. First, participants reported their perceptions of how often peers depicted as wealthy or poor had access to "extra learning opportunities." Overall, participants perceived an opportunity gap in favor of wealthy peers. Next, participants learned about a hypothetical science summer camp in a nearby city, where access had historically been restricted to allow only wealthy or only poor children to attend. Participants were told that this summer, there were many children who wanted to attend but not enough spaces to go around, and they were asked how to proceed. Across all ages, participants favored splitting the spaces equally between groups or including the group that had been excluded in the past, particularly when that group was poor. In fact, many participants reasoned about their decision explicitly in terms of

the implications of economic disparities (e.g., "Kids with little money don't get the same opportunities as others who are rich"). Moreover, the larger the economic opportunity gap participants perceived in broader society, the more they supported including poor peers in this particular opportunity and the more likely they were to reason about fair access to learning (e.g., "Everyone has the right to education no matter what background they come from").

These findings again emphasize how, particularly in late childhood and early adolescence, children begin to connect up issues of racial (Elenbaas & Killen, 2016) and economic (Elenbaas, 2019a) inequality in broader society with immediate decisions about resources and opportunities that are under their control. When children and adolescents know—from others' testimony in experimental contexts or from their own observations in daily life—that inequality is clearly rooted in discrimination, most support efforts to reduce it.

In a recent study designed to directly assess connections between developing views on societal and interpersonal distributive justice, Elenbaas and Mistry (2021) investigated 8- to 14-year-olds' beliefs regarding U.S. economic systems and the distribution of wealth at the societal level, and their behavior, judgments, and reasoning about access to opportunities at the peer level. On average, participants believed that the distribution of wealth in U.S. society was more unequal than it should be, yet they still believed that U.S. economic systems operated fairly (i.e., reported moderate system justification beliefs). When deciding who should receive access to a special opportunity using the measure from Elenbaas (2019a), participants who thought that wealth should be distributed more equally in society and participants with lower system justification beliefs directed more opportunities to poor peers. Many of these participants also reasoned about their decision in light of broader economic disparities (e.g., "Kids who are poor don't usually have the chance to do things like this").

Thus, when older children and early adolescents held more critical beliefs about the fairness of economic systems or the distribution of wealth in society, they acted more equitably when given the chance to determine who should have access to a special opportunity (Elenbaas & Mistry, 2021). Related research has likewise shown that adolescents who attribute poverty in society to individual factors (e.g., "They do not have the ambition") are more likely to prioritize effort over need when allocating money between hypothetical peers, while adolescents who attribute poverty to structural factors (e.g., "Mostly there is no work") are more likely to prioritize need over effort (Kornbluh et al., 2019).

It is important to note that recognizing that their own decisions can reflect broader social inequalities does not always guarantee that children and adolescents will choose to counteract them. As outlined in the preceding section, concerns for maintaining group status, adhering to discriminatory group norms, and widespread stereotypes justifying social inequalities are all barriers. However, research from the SRD perspective has consistently demonstrated that children and adolescents seek to address social inequalities that are reflected in interpersonal interactions for at least two main reasons. First, when they have clear evidence of past discrimination, even relatively young children are capable of taking action to correct resource disparities between groups of peers. Second, as they move into late childhood and early adolescence, children gain greater recognition of existing social inequities in their society. They are especially likely to judge resource and opportunity inequalities as wrong and take steps to rectify them when they are able to apply these broader perceptions to an intergroup context that is within their sphere of influence.

Supporting Complex Moral Reasoning about Social Inequalities

How do children and adolescents come to recognize discrimination, conceptualize social inequalities as moral issues, and make connections between broader social issues and decisions that they can make on an everyday basis? In other words, if critical evaluation of social inequalities enables resistance and change, what enables critical evaluation? In addition to general social experiences negotiating access

to resources in multiple contexts, research is beginning to point to some specific interactions and experiences that inform developing moral reasoning about distributive justice and social inequality.

Peers

Intergroup contact theory holds that cooperative, sustained interactions between members of equal status groups can reduce intergroup anxiety, increase empathy across group lines, and shift perceived norms toward greater intergroup inclusion (Dovidio et al., 2017). Friendships are an ideal form of intergroup contact. For instance, children and adolescents with more friends of different racial/ethnic backgrounds judge interracial exclusion to be more wrong for moral reasons of fairness and the prevention of psychological harm (Killen & Rutland, 2011). Intergroup contact may also influence children's early views on equity.

For example, one recent study asked 5- to 8-year-old children from higher-income families about their degree of contact with individuals from lower-income backgrounds (i.e., inter-wealth contact) and about how to distribute resources (erasers) between two peers, one depicted as rich and one depicted as poor (Elenbaas, 2019c). Children who reported more inter-wealth contact were more likely to reason about access to resources when making their decision (e.g., "Because they can buy like a million erasers and they can probably buy only one pack"). Children who reasoned about access to resources, in turn, were more likely to divide the erasers equitably, directing more to the peer depicted as poor. It remains an open question whether interactions with peers from higher-income backgrounds have a similar impact on lower-income children's reasoning. However, these results suggest that everyday interactions with socioeconomically diverse peers may raise children's consideration of the immediate consequences of resource disparities (Elenbaas, 2019c).

Parents

Research from the SRD perspective has also investigated the impact of children's and adolescents' perceptions of their parents' views on intergroup peer relationships. Importantly, many children and adolescents see parents as working against, rather encouraging, intergroup friendships (Hitti et al., 2020). For instance, one study found that a sizeable minority of White 9-, 12-, and 15-year-olds rated a White parent's discomfort as a legitimate reason for someone to refrain from inviting a Black friend to their house (Killen et al., 2007). A parallel study found that 62% of Black 9-, 12-, and 15-year-olds cited White parents' uneasiness or wariness when asked why a White peer might not invite a Black friend over (Ruck et al., 2015). On average, White adults do tend to exhibit more signs of discomfort (e.g., avoiding eye contact, leaning away) in interactions with people of color than in interactions with other White people (Dovidio et al., 2002). Studies drawing on social identity development theory have shown that not only do children detect these signs, they begin to incorporate them into their own racial attitudes (Castelli et al., 2008; Pahlke et al., 2012). Even if parents do not intentionally convey prejudiced attitudes, these perceptions of discomfort may still serve to limit children's friendships in ways that perpetuate social inequalities.

However, research in the areas of civic engagement, critical consciousness, and racial/ethnic socialization has demonstrated several important ways in which parents' explicit socialization practices contribute to adolescents' developing beliefs about social inequalities. For instance, family conversations about current events can draw adolescents' attention to structural issues in society (Flanagan, 2013) and encourage them to take actions that could reduce social inequalities at the community level (e.g., volunteering, protesting, intending to vote) (Diemer et al., 2021). Likewise, Black adolescents who hear more from their parents about the potential for racial discrimination and how to proactively cope with it are more likely to attribute educational inequalities to structural factors (e.g., "White students usually go to schools with more resources than Black students") (Bañales et al., 2019). By

contrast, adolescents whose parents primarily emphasize self-reliance (e.g., "You have to create your own opportunities, nobody hands them to you") are more likely to attribute wealth and poverty in society to individual effort and responsibility (Flanagan, 2013).

In one recent study, Elenbaas and Mistry (2022) examined how children consider their parents' messages about broader society when forming their own beliefs about economic systems and making their own decisions about distributive justice. Parents of 8- to 13-year-olds were asked how often they talked about a series of social issues with their children, and children were asked about their beliefs concerning the fairness of U.S. economic systems and decisions about access to a learning opportunity for peers. Most parents reported conversations about the importance of individual effort (e.g., "We tell our children about people who have struggled to get where they are"), and most children believed that U.S. economic systems were just and meritocratic (e.g., "Everyone has a fair chance at wealth and happiness"). Yet when parents reported more discussions about current economic issues (e.g., "We talked about what's happening with jobs and the economy lately"), children reported lower system-justifying beliefs. Likewise, when parents reported more conversations about the potential for positive change (e.g., "I told my child they can help change things in society that are unfair"), children were more likely to prioritize poor peers over rich peers for access to a hypothetical STEM learning opportunity.

Together, the evidence from the SRD perspective and related research converges to indicate that both peers and parents can play important roles in facilitating children's and adolescents' complex moral reasoning about the social inequalities that they encounter. Moreover, for adults who aim to take an active role in facilitating children's and adolescents' capacity to address social inequalities as they arise in interpersonal contexts, the best time to act seems to be as early as possible. Although most research in this area has focused on the developmental period of adolescence, children are becoming aware of broader social inequalities (Hazelbaker et al., 2018) and consider their experiences and conversations with peers and family members when reasoning about what is fair.

Conclusions

Throughout development, humans grapple with the contradictions that arise from simultaneously seeking to understand the implications of their "place" in society and seeking to challenge the injustices that arise from this understanding. Bringing together theories of children's moral and social development, the SRD model provides a framework for understanding how children and adolescents make sense of moral issues in intergroup contexts (Killen & Rutland, 2011). Understanding developing moral reasoning about social inequality is a new direction for research in this area (Elenbaas et al., 2020).

So far, research has demonstrated that children and adolescents face many challenges in becoming aware of the full scope and extent of social inequalities in their society, overcoming concerns for maintaining their own group status, resisting norms that condone inequality, and disproving stereotypes that rationalize social inequalities. Yet children and adolescents judge social inequalities as moral violations of rights and fairness when they are able to recognize their discriminatory origins, and they are more likely to take action when they recognize that their own interpersonal decisions have the potential to challenge broader social inequalities. Finally, we are just beginning to understand the important roles that peers and parents play in supporting (or suppressing) developing complex moral reasoning about social inequality. Continued investigation of how children and adolescents recognize, explain, and respond to social inequalities has the potential to help foster more equitable and just societies.

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