



Children's perceptions of social resource inequality

Laura Elenbaas*, Melanie Killen

University of Maryland, United States



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ABSTRACT

Children's perceptions of social resource inequalities were investigated by measuring open-ended explanations for race-based disparities in access to societal resources. Fifth graders ($N = 139$, $M = 11.14$ years, $SD = 0.61$ years) viewed animated vignettes depicting hypothetical resource inequalities between institutions serving children of African-American and European-American background. Children frequently explained disparities in terms of institutions' differing financial resources, revealing awareness that economic inequalities often underlie groups' differential access to societal resources. Further, children attributed inequalities to differential treatment more often when they witnessed African-Americans at a disadvantage than when they witnessed European-Americans at a disadvantage, demonstrating awareness that racial minority groups are more likely to experience restricted access to resources. Finally, children who reasoned about differential treatment judged inequality, and actions that perpetuated inequality, more negatively than children who attributed inequalities to institutions' differing needs, revealing a link between awareness of discrimination and rejection of social inequalities.

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1. Introduction

Throughout development children are aware of resource inequality. Research on children's moral judgments, for example, has demonstrated children's negative evaluations of unequal resource distribution between peers (Killen & Smetana, 2015). Other research has likewise revealed that children are aware of inequality on a broader level. By the end of elementary school, for example, children identify whether individuals are rich or poor based on their material possessions (Horwitz, Shutts, & Olson, 2014; Mistry, Brown, White, Chow, & Gillen-O'Neel, 2015). While research on children's moral judgments about resource distribution has revealed reasoning about fairness, justice, and other's welfare (Killen, Elenbaas, Rizzo, & Rutland, 2016), research on children's reasoning about the causes of wealth and poverty has often revealed assumptions linking economic disparities with differences in effort and intelligence (Chafel & Neitzel, 2005; Flanagan et al., 2014). The current study investigated children's reasoning about social resource inequality, which reflects a new area at the intersection of fairness judgments and knowledge about intergroup relations.

1.1. Theoretical framework: social reasoning developmental model

In order to frame the current study, we drew on an integrative theoretical model called the social reasoning developmental (SRD) model, which emphasizes the importance of both moral concerns about fairness as well as group affiliations and expectations throughout development (Killen, Elenbaas, & Rutland, 2015; Rutland, Killen, & Abrams, 2010). This theoretical model draws on extensive work on moral development from the perspective of social domain theory (Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014; Turiel, 2006) as well as developmental social identity theories concerning the development of intergroup attitudes (Abrams & Rutland, 2008; Nesdale, 2004; Verkuyten, 2007).

Considerable research on children's intergroup attitudes has focused on the negative aspects of group membership in terms of children's treatment of others (e.g., in-group biases, prejudice). The SRD model likewise posits that, in many social contexts, children's stereotypes and biases can lead them to treat others unfairly. For example, children exclude, tease, and shun peers based on stereotypes about group memberships like race or gender (Killen et al., 2015). However, the SRD model proposes that knowledge about intergroup relations can also contribute to, rather than impede, the promotion of fairness in childhood.

Specifically, social knowledge about intergroup relations can include recognition of when relations between groups have been unfair. In fact, with age, children gain increasing awareness of how norms about

* Corresponding author at: University of Maryland, Department of Human Development and Quantitative Methodology, 3942 Campus Drive, Suite 3304, College Park, MD 20742-1131, United States.

E-mail address: elenbaas@umd.edu (L. Elenbaas).

intergroup relations are not always acceptable from a moral viewpoint. For instance, relative to young children, early adolescents are better able to distinguish their *expectations* for how members of groups will interact from their judgments about how individuals *should* relate to one another (e.g., Hitti & Killen, 2015; Mulvey, Hitti, Rutland, Abrams, & Killen, 2014; Mulvey & Killen, 2015). Research drawing on the SRD model has demonstrated how this developing knowledge about how groups work can contribute to children's decisions to challenge unfair group practices, including the exclusion of peers from social "out-groups" (Killen & Rutland, 2011).

In the context of the current study, the SRD model predicts that when children recognize that intergroup relations have been *unfair* in the past, they can use that knowledge to advocate for *fair* relations between groups in the present. The SRD model generated novel hypotheses regarding relations between children's *explanations* for observed resource inequalities between groups and their *judgments* about the wrongfulness of resource inequalities and actions taken to perpetuate them. The following three sections outline the aims of the study and introduce related research in this area before turning to our specific hypotheses.

1.2. Children's explanations for group-based resource inequality

The first aim of the current study was to investigate children's self-generated explanations for observed inequalities of resources between racial groups. By 10–11 years of age, children are aware that different social groups, including racial groups, often differ in economic status (Bigler, Averhart, & Liben, 2003; Elenbaas & Killen, 2016a; Newheiser & Olson, 2012; Shutts, Brey, Dornbusch, Slywotzky, & Olson, 2016). What is not yet known is whether children are likewise aware that disparities in group economic status often underlie observed racial inequalities in access to societal resources. Economic disparities are a primary form of inequality. That is, while inequalities in access to societal resources like quality education and health care often map on to other group categories (including race), economic inequalities underlie inequality in most other domains (Saegert et al., 2007).

Notably, the existing literature suggests that knowledge about the economic underpinnings of resource inequality between groups is slow to develop. For example, with few exceptions (Chafel & Neitzel, 2005; Hussak & Cimpian, 2015), studies have shown that children do not spontaneously consider how social factors (e.g., insufficient educational or job opportunities) contribute to differences in individuals' economic status until 12–18 years of age (Arsenio, Preziosi, Silberstein, & Hamburger, 2013; Flanagan et al., 2014; Goodman et al., 2000; Mistry, Brown, Chow, & Collins, 2012). Younger children have also been shown to perceive certain group-based resource inequalities to be deserved, and to assume that the way things are is the way that they are supposed to be (McGillicuddy-De Lisi, Daly, & Neal, 2006; Olson, Dweck, Spelke, & Banaji, 2011). Likewise there are many instances in which adults rationalize or legitimize existing inequalities between groups, fulfilling a psychological need to understand the status quo as good, fair, natural, desirable, and inevitable (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004).

Whether or not children are aware of the links between economic disparities and groups' unequal access to societal resources has important implications for their social relations with, and attitudes toward, advantaged and disadvantaged peers. By the end of the elementary years, for example, children endorse stereotypes linking economic success with personal merits (e.g., hard work, intelligence) and economic disadvantage with personal failings (e.g., laziness) (Shutts et al., 2016; Sigelman, 2012; Woods, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2005), and further exclude stigmatized peers based on these stereotypes (Abrams & Killen, 2014; Bucchianeri, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013). Thus, understanding children's assumptions about the causes of social resource inequality provides a window on the origins of stereotypes that

reinforce a damaging cycle of inequality (Abrams & Killen, 2014; Brown & Bigler, 2005).

There is reason to believe, however, that children may recognize some of the economic factors that contribute to group disparities in access to societal resources prior to adolescence. First, unlike individual differences in economic status, race-related differences in access to societal resources are group-level concerns, bringing group-level factors like associations of race and wealth to the forefront. By the end of the elementary years, children are aware that different social groups, including racial groups, often differ (on average) in economic status (Bigler et al., 2003; Elenbaas & Killen, 2016a; Newheiser & Olson, 2012; Shutts et al., 2016). They may, accordingly, be able to recognize some of the economic factors underlying a clear-cut racial disparity in access to societal resources. Thus, in the current study, we presented 10–11 year-old participants with several examples of unequal allocation of educational and health care resources based on race, and measured their self-generated explanations for the inequalities.

1.3. Explanations for inequality based on group race

Building on this point, in the United States, children from certain racial groups are, on average, more likely to experience restricted access to resources than are children from other racial groups. For example, African-American children are, on average, more likely to attend under-resourced schools than are European-American children (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). The second goal of the current study was to determine whether children are aware of discrimination as a cause of resource inequality (in addition to economic disparities between groups, as outlined above), and whether the race of the group that is observed to be receiving fewer resources impacts children's likelihood of attributing a resource inequality to discrimination. That is, while the first aim of the study asked whether children recognize that economic factors contribute to groups' access to resources, the second aim asked whether children were more likely to perceive resource inequality as discrimination when African-American children were disadvantaged than when European-American children were disadvantaged.

Related research on children's awareness of others' biases has revealed that, by 10–13 years of age, children are aware that, in certain contexts, members of racial/ethnic minority groups are more likely to be the targets of discrimination than are European-Americans (Brown, Mistry, & Bigler, 2007; Hughes, 2011; McKown & Strambler, 2009). This work has largely focused on specific instances of bias, examining, for example, children's knowledge of historical events pertaining to race and differential treatment. Children may also be more likely to detect discrimination when a racial minority group receives fewer resources than a racial majority group, though this possibility has not yet been tested empirically. Thus, we presented participants in the current study with two scenarios: one in which institutions serving African-Americans were receiving fewer resources, and one in which institutions serving European-Americans were receiving fewer resources. Then, we tested for differences in children's explanations for resource inequality based on the race of the disadvantaged group.

Whether or not children perceive discrimination to be more likely when certain groups are targeted for restricted access to resources has important implications for how they may respond to that inequality. There is little evidence that adopting a "color-blind" approach sufficiently prepares children to combat issues of inequality in their own lives or in society (Elenbaas & Killen, 2016b; Hughes, 2003; Levy, West, & Ramirez, 2005; Pahlke, Bigler, & Suizzo, 2012). Rather, in order to reject unfair patterns of distribution, children must first be able to recognize them as such. Thus, the third and final aim of the current study was to test for relations between children's self-generated explanations for the inequalities that they observed and their judgments about the wrongfulness of these disparities and actions taken to perpetuate them.

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