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Moral judgments and emotions: Adolescents' evaluations in intergroup social exclusion contexts

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Abstract

This chapter examines children's moral judgments and emotional evaluations in the context of social exclusion. With age, children and adolescents face increasingly complex situations in which group membership and allegiance are in contrast to morally relevant decisions, such as the exclusion of a individual from a group¹⁶. While adolescents are often characterized as being conformists to group norms, research demonstrates that youth's judgments about fairness, justice, and rights can supersede negative or exclusive norms espoused by groups. Additionally, youth's emotional evaluations of members who do not conform to a group norm are in concert with these fairness judgments. Implications for social and moral development will be discussed in the context of empirical findings.

Reasoning and emotion in humans are often conceptualized at opposite ends of a spectrum, with emotions perceived as instinctual, reflexive, or automatic, and reasoning perceived as learned, deliberate, or intentional. However, in contrast to this dichotomous perspective, considerable research supports the view that emotions and reasoning are reciprocal and complementary, particularly in morally relevant social contexts^{3; 21}. As will be proposed in this paper, emotions and judgments are linked in children's and adolescents' social interpretations of events in daily life. Experiencing an emotion involves an evaluative appraisal in most contexts, and these components are both important for understanding the development of morality³⁶. Adolescence is often characterized as a time of emotional turbulence, hormonal changes, and parent-teen rebellion³¹. However, this perspective fails to account for the reflection and development of ideologies that occurs during this period³¹. Adolescence is also a time when youth establish a strong sense of group affiliation that has

significant implications for their developing principles of fairness, justice, and equality¹⁷. However, not enough research has examined the reciprocal nature of moral judgments and emotions during adolescence⁸, and even less work has examined these variables in a social exclusion context.

Throughout development, emotions are central to making morally relevant evaluations and attributions in social contexts³⁰. Emotions provide important information when reading social cues, recalling past experiences, and deciding how to respond in social interactions². As peer contexts become increasingly meaningful in adolescence, youth begin to weigh moral and emotional judgments in complex ways, as issues of group identity and group loyalty are brought to bear on morally salient decisions¹⁶. In the first half of this paper we will review current research on the role of emotions in moral judgments during adolescence, highlighting work that sheds new light on the particularly complex context of intergroup social exclusion. In the second half of this paper we will explore new directions for future research on intergroup social exclusion in adolescence that draw on the increasing salience of group membership in youth and the consequences of individual resistance to group norms; we introduce a research agenda focused on understanding young peoples' moral judgments and emotions in these complex social contexts.

Developmental origins of moral judgments and emotions

Adolescents' evaluations of others' emotional states and anticipations of the effects of social interactions or moral violations are key to moral development, as these emotional judgments pertain to issues of fairness, justice, harm, and rights. To understand the relationship between emotions and judgments in adolescence, it is valuable to understand the precursors or building blocks, that is, the foundations of morality prior to adolescence. From a young age, sympathy and empathy emerge as components of early morality that involve both emotions and judgments⁸. Infants and young children have been shown to demonstrate empathy and sympathy, and to cooperate with peers and adults who share a common goal²⁷ from as young as 14 months of age³⁸. For example, toddlers' emotional responses (facial, vocal, and gestural expressions of concern) towards an individual feigning pain increase with age²⁷, suggesting that experiences of empathic arousal (especially within the context of adult guidance) promote moral development³³. Research suggests that young children understand moral behavior through experience with negative emotions such as guilt, fear, and anxiety¹⁰. However, research also indicates that a wider range of emotions (not only negative feelings) are important for children's social-emotional and moral growth^{7; 33}. Thus, there is clear evidence for the coexistence of both positive and negative emotions in children's lives, and for the relevance of both in the acquisition of morality. In the next section, we report on how emotions and judgments are interwoven in adolescents' evaluations of complex social exchanges, and particularly exchanges that involve exclusion and intergroup attitudes.

Social exclusion: Types and consequences

Peer rejection and social exclusion are ubiquitous throughout childhood and adolescence, and present a critical context to examine social, moral, and emotional development. One

type of research on peer rejection in childhood and adolescence focuses on interpersonal social exclusion. In this context, individual differences such as temperament and social-emotional traits contribute to maladaptive peer relationships and the rejection of one individual by another^{4, 28}. In instances of interpersonal social exclusion, the rejected individual is described as shy, fearful, or lacking in social skills, and the individual who initiates the rejection is one who habitually engages in bullying and is often found to be extremely aggressive. As a consequence of exclusion, rejected children and adolescents suffer from depression, loneliness, social withdrawal, and poor academic achievement⁴.

Witnessing the exclusion of an individual from a group can illicit emotional responses of empathy or sympathy in adolescence²¹, but understanding the context and criteria for exclusion is essential for determining the moral relevance of the act. In some cases, an act of rejection that is interpreted as interpersonal by one person could be interpreted as intergroup by another, and wrong. For example, rejecting a peer from a swim team may involve interpersonal rejection; however, if the team is ethnic majority and the excluded member is ethnic minority then the context creates a different factor, which is also intergroup (not just interpersonal). As an illustration, an adolescent might feel empathy for a poor swimmer who is excluded from a high school varsity swim team, but also view this exclusion as legitimate. In contrast, the same adolescent might feel empathy for a Black student who is excluded from the swim team because of a belief that Black people cannot swim, and also view this type of exclusion as discriminatory and thus morally wrong. Research has provided evidence for this distinction in terms of individuals' affective responses to exclusion, and subsequent emotional judgments of the excluding group. For example, Nesdale et al.²⁵ examined social exclusion on the basis of school membership (intergroup exclusion) and perceived drawing talent (interpersonal exclusion) with a sample of six and eight year old Australian children. Participants who were rejected for an intergroup reason (school membership) reported greater dislike of the rejecting group than children who were rejected for an interpersonal (drawing talent) reason. Though both types of social exclusion caused distress for participants, this study highlights the importance of both affective experiences and social cognitive judgments in determining the moral relevance of exclusion in intergroup contexts.

In contrast to interpersonal rejection, research on intergroup exclusion addresses the macro, societal-level structures of prejudice, bias, power, and status that emerge early in childhood and result in group-based rejection²⁰. The emotional consequences of exclusion on the basis of group membership are severe, as individuals under these circumstances experience discrimination and rejection as a result of stereotypes, prejudice, and bias that can lead to anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and academic risk factors¹⁴. Research on adolescents in the United States has indicated that experiences of discrimination based on racial/ethnic group membership differ across groups, with participants of Latin American and Asian backgrounds reporting more experiences of discrimination from adults and peers than their European-American peers¹⁴. Frequency of discrimination has been found to predict lower grade point average, lower self-esteem, and more depressive symptoms, distress, and physical complaints¹⁴. Furthermore, the existence and status of various types of groups in an individuals' environment can also play a role in understanding the impact of discrimination on adolescent wellbeing. For example, Graham et al.⁹ found that, for a sample of Latino and African-American adolescents, self-blame (for one's own experience

of social exclusion) partially explained the relationship between victimization and maladjustment when participants were members of the racial/ethnic majority at their school, but not when participants were members of the racial/ethnic minority.

The caustic consequences of discrimination underscore the importance of understanding adolescents' emotions, evaluations, and social-cognitive reasoning about discrimination in their lives. Youths' understanding and perceptions of discrimination are shaped by age-related changes in their cognitive skills as they shift from a focus on the relation between individuals' intergroup biases and their discriminatory behavior to acknowledgement of the role of society and the unjust systems of oppression that perpetuate discrimination⁵.

Intergroup social exclusion in adolescence: A theoretical model

When young people make decisions about social exclusion or evaluate the exclusion decisions of others, they integrate their affective experiences, their social cognitive attributions of the emotions and intentions of others, and their moral reasoning capabilities. Although adolescence is often characterized as a period of group conformity³¹, research indicates that, with age, youth become increasingly aware of the moral and emotional consequences of social exclusion on the basis of group membership, strengthening their evaluation of such exclusion as wrong^{12; 13; 15}. In this section we highlight recent research on intergroup social exclusion in adolescence that illustrates how emotions and moral judgments intertwine in this context.

Killen and her colleagues have investigated intergroup social exclusion by drawing on social domain theory as well as social identity theory^{17; 32; 34; 35} and identifying a new perspective, referred to as a social reasoning developmental model²⁹. Traditionally, social domain theory identified three domains as central to social evaluations of everyday events. The *moral* domain refers to issues of justice, others' welfare, and rights, in which inter-individual treatment results in a victim deprived of rights or resources. The *societal* domain refers to conventions, traditions, and customs determined by social consensus and designed to make groups work well (these do not have moral consequences). The *psychological* domain refers to personal choice (decisions that are not regulated but viewed as a matter of individual preferences)³⁴. Social identity theory provided a model for evaluating the degree to which an adolescents' group identity bears on their evaluations of intergroup social exclusion. Ingroup identity emerges early in development, and is related to outgroup derogation in that motivation to enhance the ingroup results in dislike of the outgroup under conditions of threat. Developmental social identity research has shown that the degree to which a child or adolescent identifies with a group is related to their emerging prejudice and bias^{23; 29}.

Studies incorporating both social identity theory and social domain theory led to the social reasoning model, which expanded the content of the domain categories for the area of intergroup exclusion to include the wrongfulness of discrimination (*moral*), group functioning and group identity (*societal*) and intentionality (*psychological*) which are central for the social evaluations of multifaceted and complex events. Research has demonstrated that social exclusion is variably viewed as wrong (unfair), legitimate (for group

functioning), or a personal choice. The contextual features that are related to different forms of reasoning include the complexity or ambiguity of a situation, along with other information such as knowledge and prior experience, as well as group goals for a review, see ¹⁹. Research questions have pertained to the degree to which identification with a group is related to social reasoning about intergroup exclusion ¹⁷. Furthermore, current research has also applied this model to group membership contexts beyond those of race and ethnicity, and has expanded the study of intergroup social exclusion to the context of school groups, nationality, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.

Across samples of European–American, African–American, Asian–American, Latin–American, and multiracial adolescents, ratings of the wrongfulness of race-based social exclusion, for example, have been found to increase with age; participants judged such exclusion to be wrong on the moral grounds of unfair treatment ¹⁵. The role of group membership status, however, is significant in these contexts. When examining racial/ethnic minority and majority children's evaluations of race-based exclusion, racial/ethnic minority children were found to evaluate exclusion as more wrong than did racial/ethnic majority children ¹⁵. A similar age-related pattern emerges with regard to adolescents' decisions regarding the acceptability of excluding an individual from an activity on the basis of sexual orientation; such exclusion is viewed as increasingly wrong with age on the moral grounds of human equality and fairness ¹³.

When examining multidimensional frameworks of group membership, adolescents demonstrate an increasing capacity to weigh the impact of exclusion based on different types of group membership. For example, Danish majority adolescents have been found to differentiate exclusion on the basis of gender and ethnicity, deeming exclusion based on gender to be more acceptable (for conventional reasons) than exclusion based on ethnicity (which was condemned for moral reasons) ²². Similarly, ethnic majority Dutch and minority Turkish adolescents have been found to judge the exclusion of someone who shared their gender and ethnicity to be worse than the exclusion of someone with whom they shared only one or no common ingroup. These adolescents also evaluated excluders who shared their gender and ethnicity less harshly than excluders with whom they shared only one or no common ingroup ³⁷. These results begin to elaborate the complexities of group dynamics in adolescence, and the ways in which group membership influences adolescents' emotional and cognitive appraisals of intergroup social exclusion situations. Though the context is morally salient, decisions in such social situations are multifaceted.

Significant strides have been made towards understanding the reciprocal nature of reasoning and emotion in the morally salient context of intergroup social exclusion. However, as previously stated, few studies have directly assessed both judgments and emotions in the context of group-based social exclusion. One exception is a recent study by Malti, Killen, and Gasser ²¹ in which both social cognition related to participants' evaluations of exclusion and emotional attributions to the individuals involved were directly examined in regards to exclusion on both an interpersonal and intergroup basis. In this study, adolescents of native Swiss and other non-Swiss nationalities evaluated the exclusion of an individual on the basis of gender, nationality (Serbian or Swiss), or personality. Overall, exclusion based on nationality (a type of group membership) was judged to be less acceptable than exclusion

based on personality (an individual characteristic), and this distinction was particularly strong for non-Swiss participants. Participants overall thought that the individual who excluded another would feel pride, happiness, guilt, shame, and empathy, and the excluded individual would feel sadness and anger, but non-Swiss participants were noted to attribute more positive emotions to the excluding character than did Swiss participants. This study illustrated the interplay of emotions and cognitive judgments as young people consider the sensitive issue of exclusion on the basis of group membership.

The questions of group membership, multiple group membership, and group status make decisions regarding exclusion of an individual based on group affiliation complex. In addition to these variables, adolescents must also consider the current affective state of relations between groups. Intergroup relations are not always negative, and in fact the norms that a group has about attitudes towards and treatment of individuals from other groups have been found to be influential in individuals' perceptions of outgroups. Research on intergroup contact has established that intergroup interactions under conditions in which both groups share common goals and cooperate, and in which both groups have equal status and institutional/authority support, decreases biases and promotes harmonious social relationships^{1; 6; 26}. These norms and affective states can be manipulated experimentally in order to understand their impact on several levels across development. For example, Anglo-Australian children in an intergroup drawing competition relate differently to their competing team with age. Seven-year-olds reported dislike for the competing team in all cases except when their team held a norm of inclusion (liked people who were different) and the competing team was non-threatening; in this case seven-year-olds liked the competing team. In contrast, nine-year-olds were neutral towards the competing team in all cases except when their team held a norm of exclusion (did not like people who are different) and the competing team threatened the participant's team (said they were "out to get" them); in this case nine-year-olds disliked the competing team²⁴. In sum, children as young as 7 years of age are able to coordinate information as nuanced as the emotional relations between groups, the moral norms that groups hold, and overarching social category memberships. These components of intergroup relations contribute to young people's perceptions and emotional evaluations of intergroup social exclusion.

Intergroup social exclusion: Adolescents' evaluations of group nonconformists

Research on social exclusion in adolescence that takes into account both moral reasoning and emotional attributions contributes to an especially rich understanding of the interplay of reasoning and emotion and bridges the gap between these often dissociated constructs in research on intergroup relations. Just as group membership cannot be reduced to an individuals' identification with one single overarching societal grouping like race/ethnicity, nationality, gender, or sexual orientation, the decision about whether to exclude an individual from a group hinges on all of these factors, as well as the ingroup and outgroup attitudes or norms held by the groups in question²⁹. Yet not all members of groups conform to group norms. When an individual's group loyalty is called into question, adolescents' capacity to recognize and evaluate that individual and their actions gives us greater insight

into moral development in youth. Research in this domain investigates individuals' perceptions of group nonconformists, their actions, and what their group should do as a result. How do adolescents feel about individuals who dissent from (or do not conform to) a group's customs or beliefs? How do these feelings vary based on the moral relevance of the nonconformist's actions (was he/she standing up against a negative group norm)? When do adolescents make the decision to exclude someone who is going against the norms of their group? How do these decisions and the reasons for them vary based on the moral relevance of the nonconformist's actions (was he/she undercutting a positive group norm)?

It has been argued that social change comes about by resisting group norms that violate moral principles of fairness, justice and rights³⁵. Throughout adolescence, youth are confronted with groups in which norms and behavior are in contrast to the moral values of justice, fairness and human rights. In these instances, when a group promotes inequality or injustice, deviance from such a group *is* morally warranted. Recent work by Killen et al.¹⁸ established a paradigm for investigating the interplay between the social norms of groups, exclusion decisions, and group identity. Building from this paradigm, findings from Hitti et al.¹¹ examined when youth judged the act of excluding a deviant member of a group as wrong and found that children and adolescents' own affective evaluations of the nonconformist predicted variance in their judgments of exclusion.

To illustrate our points about emotions and moral judgments in an intergroup context, findings from Hitti et al.¹¹ regarding the influence of group norms on adolescents' emotional evaluations of nonconformists and evaluations of exclusion will be briefly reviewed. In this study, U.S. participants aged 9 – 10 years and 13 – 14 years were introduced to age- and gender-matched groups that held norms about moral issues pertaining to the distribution of important resources (money), and a nonconformist who went against the group norm by advocating the opposite perspective. Participants were asked how much they liked each nonconformist (individual favorability: “how much do you like or not like the nonconformist?”). Next, it was explained that the group had decided to exclude this individual, and participants were asked how “okay” or “not okay” they thought the exclusion decision was (acceptability of exclusion: “how okay or not okay is it for the group to exclude the nonconformist?”).

In examining the relationship between how much participants liked a nonconformist and whether or not they thought it was acceptable to exclude that person, responses were linked such that participants who reported not liking the nonconformist also found it more acceptable for the group to exclude him/her (Figure 1). While participants found it more acceptable for the group to exclude a nonconformist if they themselves did not like this member, the degree of their acceptability varied by the type of nonconformist (or type of belief endorsed by the nonconformist). Participants who did *not* like the nonconformist who advocated for an unequal distribution, when the group held an equal norm, rated the group's decision to exclude that person significantly different from “neutral,” suggesting that in this case youth affirmed the group's decision to exclude. Thus this unequal nonconformist, though he/she would advantage the group by suggesting that they have receive more money than another group, went against the group's equal norm. Participants who did not like this member also felt that the group's decision to exclude the unequal nonconformist was

warranted. Evaluations were different, however for the nonconformist who espoused equality. Youth who did *not* like the equal nonconformist evaluated the group's decision to exclude this member to be "neutral". Thus, they did not accept or reject the group's decision to exclude. Perhaps this case presented a moral tension; here the nonconformist advocated for equal distribution of money (putting them in the moral right), yet doing so went against a group norm.

These results indicate a tension between youth's emotional evaluations of those who resist a group's norm and their judgments about the social exclusion of such individuals. In contrast to other work on intergroup social exclusion (referenced in the preceding sections), youth in this study did not always exhibit increasing disapproval of social exclusion with age. In fact, no age findings were confirmed in these analyses. Both children and adolescents' feelings towards the nonconformist were not always in harmony with their opinions regarding the exclusion of that individual from the group, as evidenced by their evaluations of excluding an equal nonconforming group member.

Overall, these results suggest youth to be proficient at dually engaging norms about the expectations of their social group with the overarching moral norms of society. The participants in this study recognized the tension between group norms and societal expectations, and their moral evaluations of a nonconformist and their judgments regarding the acceptability of exclusion of this individual reveal their joint concern for group identity and morality.

Conclusion

Issues of inclusion and exclusion are central to social life. Adolescents frequently experience complex social situations involving peer pressure and group membership that reflect conflicting messages, goals, and norms. In cases in which members of their own group espouse norms that go against moral values like fairness, justice, and rights, the decision of what to do, whether exclusion is justified, and whether this type of deviance changes one's favorability towards one's peer or the group is difficult^{17; 35}. Understanding the emotion attributions as well as the social evaluations of these types of encounters provide new insights regarding the integration of emotional evaluations and moral judgments in the context of social exclusion. Ultimately, a central challenge for development is to determine when morality takes priority over group loyalty, and what to do in cases in which a conflict exists. Studying these social cognitive judgments and processes in adolescence will help to create programs to ameliorate prejudicial attitudes that if left unchecked in adolescence, create tensions and problems in the adult world of the workforce. Creating a just and fair society involves attending to the social developmental origins of fairness, and to facilitating positive social development.

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Figure 1. “Do you like the equal/unequal nonconformist?” / “How okay or not okay is it for the group to exclude this member?”