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Children's evaluations of direct and indirect bias justifications for same-race inclusion



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ABSTRACT

Different forms of prejudice emerge in childhood, often referred to as direct and indirect bias. Little is known about children's evaluations of whether certain forms of bias are more okay than others, particularly in the context of peer and parental messages about interracial social inclusion. To address this gap, the current study investigated how Black and White American children aged 6 to 12 years ($N = 219$; $M_{\text{age}} = 9.18$ years, $SD = 1.90$; 51% female) evaluate vignettes in which a Black or White peer opted to include a same-race peer due to indirect bias (preferences for in-group similarity) or direct bias (expressions of out-group dislike). Data were collected in 2021 and 2022. Children evaluated same-race inclusion due to expressions of out-group dislike more negatively than same-race inclusion due to in-group similarity preference. They also evaluated same-race inclusion due to a preference for in-group similarity stated by peers more negatively than when stated by parents. Children evaluated same-race inclusion due to parental preference more positively when the child who included a same-race peer was Black than when the child who included a same-race peer was White. Participants who negatively evaluated same-race inclusion due to parental preference were more likely to use moral reasoning to justify their evaluations, whereas participants who positively evaluated this inclusion were more likely to use non-moral reasoning. This study revealed novel insights about how Black and White American children evaluate forms of direct

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and indirect bias as justifications for same-race inclusion and how their reasoning relates to their evaluations.

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Introduction

Children consider a variety of factors when including or excluding friends and peers in social group contexts. One prominent factor children incorporate into their decision making is information about peers' social group membership (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity) (Killen et al., 2013; Rutland & Killen, 2015). Peer exclusion based solely on one's social group membership is called intergroup exclusion (Burkholder et al., 2019; Cooley et al., 2016). An example of intergroup exclusion based on racial group membership is when children are excluded from an activity because of their race. Being the victim of interracial social exclusion and other forms of unequal treatment based on race in childhood is harmful and is associated with various negative emotional, health, and academic outcomes (Brown, 2017; Chavous et al., 2008; Neblett et al., 2013; Yip, 2015).

Same-race inclusion includes the decisions an individual makes when deciding whom to include in social contexts and in peer groups (Burkholder et al., 2019). In some contexts, same-race inclusion can be a form of interracial social exclusion, such as when children display a same-race or ethnic preference when deciding whom to include in a group. Inclusion based on same-race preference perpetuates status hierarchies and communicates negative attitudes about racial minority group peers (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Rutland & Killen, 2015). In addition, investigating children's peer inclusion decisions and evaluations is important because inclusion contexts (i.e., social contexts in which an individual is deciding whom to include in a peer group or activity) often reveal subtle stereotypic expectations that are not as frequently observed when asking children directly about peer exclusion given that these contexts can reflect more complex social scenarios (Hitti & Killen, 2015). Children are frequently exposed to complex intergroup scenarios where they must weigh competing interests, such as moral concerns and group functioning concerns, in their decision-making process (Elenbaas et al., 2020). Investigating children's same-race inclusion decisions and evaluations in hypothetical scenarios increases understanding of children's attitudes and reasoning in more complex social scenarios. It also increases understanding of the factors that contribute to when children challenge instances of intergroup exclusion. This knowledge can inform prejudice reduction interventions that provide scaffolding to children regarding the identification and challenge of racial bias and discrimination.

There are many reasons why children might choose to include someone from the same racial background, such as direct racial bias or indirect racial bias. *Direct racial bias* is "a personal and sometimes unreasoned judgment made solely on an individual's race" (Williams, 2011), such as disliking someone based on the person being a racial out-group member. Children often evaluate forms of intergroup exclusion justified by direct racial bias as illegitimate through negatively evaluating hypothetical intergroup exclusion scenarios where the exclusion is motivated by direct racial bias (Killen et al., 2007; Mulvey, 2016). Other times, these decisions are motivated by *indirect racial bias*, which are beliefs or judgments that contribute to racial segregation or other unequal treatment based on race without *explicitly* being about an individual's race. In-group similarity, the belief that one has more in common with an individual who is part of one's in-group than an individual who is not part of the in-group, is a form of indirect racial bias that can be used to justify same-race inclusion. At times, children neutrally or positively evaluate forms of intergroup exclusion justified by indirect racial bias, thereby evaluating them as legitimate justifications for intergroup exclusion (Hitti & Killen, 2015; Stark & Flache, 2012). Indirect biases, such as when individuals display preferences for same-race peers, are more ambiguous because the preference for same-race peers does not necessarily reflect a dislike for out-group members but rather a comfort level reflecting a sense of familiarity (Burkholder et al., 2019; Killen et al., 2010; Stark & Flache, 2012).

It is unknown whether children are aware of the distinction between direct and indirect biases and whether they evaluate these motives differently in social exchanges. This matters because it adds to the understanding of children's cognition about interracial exclusion. In addition, it provides knowledge about what types of racial bias children are more likely to challenge or confront in peer scenarios given that prior research has found that the more negatively American children evaluate an instance of racial exclusion, the more likely they are to challenge the excluder (Scott et al., 2023). If children differentially evaluate direct racial bias and indirect racial bias, this could provide initial evidence that children are more likely to challenge intergroup exclusion motivated by some forms of racial bias over other forms of racial bias. This knowledge may inform the development of bias reduction programs, suggesting the need for interventions targeted to specific forms of bias. To fill a gap in the literature, then, it is necessary to investigate how children evaluate same-race inclusion when it is justified by direct as well as indirect racial bias.

In the social psychological study of intergroup relations and prejudice, there has been debate as to whether in-group preference and out-group bias are reciprocally related (e.g., Brewer, 1999). That is, if an individual holds positive feelings and preferences toward his or her in-group, does this mean that the person *automatically* has negative feelings and bias toward out-group members? Social identity development theory (Nesdale & Lawson, 2011) argues that in-group preference develops early in childhood as a result of affiliating with groups (Dunham et al., 2011; Kinzler & Spelke, 2011), but out-group prejudice *only* develops under certain circumstances, such as when there is a group norm of out-group exclusion or when an out-group threat is present (Nesdale et al., 2005). The current study examined how children evaluate same-race inclusion decisions when they are framed as being explicitly justified by either out-group dislike, a form of direct racial bias, or in-group similarity preference, which reflects indirect racial bias.

Beyond in-group similarity, indirect racial bias is also reflected by social pressure, namely an individual engaging in intergroup exclusion due to the preferences of the individuals around that person, such as peers or parents (Burkholder et al., 2019; Edmonds & Killen, 2009). An instance of intergroup exclusion motivated by social pressure represents a form of indirect bias because the excluder's reasoning is *not* "I want to exclude that person because they are Black" but rather "I want to exclude that person because I don't want to face negative consequences from my parents or peers." Social pressure frequently comes from both parents and peers (Edmonds & Killen, 2009; Hitti et al., 2020; Killen et al., 2007; Rivas-Drake et al., 2009). Both parents and peers play significant, yet distinct, roles in shaping children's attitudes about interracial peer interactions and the possible emergence of racial prejudice (Brown, 2017; Hitti et al., 2020; Killen et al., 2007; McGuire et al., 2015; Rivas-Drake et al., 2009). Thus, it is important to explore how children evaluate parental and peer preferences as justifications for same-race inclusion.

Theoretical framework

The aims, design, and hypotheses of this study were guided by the social reasoning developmental (SRD) model (Elenbaas et al., 2020; Rutland & Killen, 2015). The SRD model draws from social identity theories (Nesdale, 2008; Tajfel et al., 1979) as well as social domain theory (Smetana et al., 2014; Turiel, 2015) to examine the reasoning used in individuals' decisions in intergroup contexts. The SRD model asserts that children use multiple types of reasoning in their decision-making about social inclusion and exclusion in intergroup contexts (Elenbaas et al., 2020; Rutland et al., 2010). These types of reasoning include moral (e.g., fairness, others' welfare; "You shouldn't exclude someone just based on their skin color, that is not fair"), group identity (e.g., group dynamics, perceptions of group status; "Girls are different than boys, so those girls shouldn't invite that boy to play"), and psychological knowledge (e.g., attribution of motivation or justification, autonomy; "She shouldn't care what her friends think, she should just do what she wants"). These three different types of reasoning are weighed by children in intergroup contexts, and a vital research question is determining when children prioritize one form of reasoning over another (Mulvey, 2016; Rutland et al., 2010).

Giving priority to moral concerns like fairness and equality is associated with individuals rejecting prejudicial or discriminatory decisions, such as by negatively evaluating intergroup exclusion (Mulvey, 2016). When children and adolescents evaluate a social exclusion or inclusion decision

explicitly based on group membership, children often justify their negative evaluations with moral reasoning (Gönül et al., 2023). In contrast, when children evaluate exclusion and inclusion scenarios that are less explicit and more complex, such as when indirect racial bias justifications are used, their evaluations are more likely to give priority to non-moral reasons, such as group functioning concerns (Cooley et al., 2016). In these instances, children are also more likely to condone intergroup exclusion (Cooley et al., 2016).

Previous literature motivated by the SRD model has found that children express multiple justifications for intergroup exclusion. Children view (a) indirect racial bias in the form of *in-group similarity* (Hitti & Killen, 2015; Stark & Flache, 2012) and (b) direct racial bias in the form of *out-group dislike* (Griffiths & Nesdale, 2006; Nesdale & Lawson, 2011; Nesdale et al., 2005) as legitimate reasons for intergroup exclusion. Furthermore, it has been found that children often cite indirect racial bias in the form of social influences, specifically (a) *peer preference* and (b) *parental preference*, as justifications for intergroup exclusion (Burkholder et al., 2021; Killen et al., 2007).

Children can display and accept indirect and direct bias

Previous research has found that children often accept in-group similarity as a valid reason for intergroup exclusion. For example, White European American children aged 6 and 9 years have been shown to assume that other children are more similar when they are members of the same racial out-group (McGlothlin et al., 2005). Furthermore, Dutch children aged 12 and 13 years who attend ethnically diverse schools often justify the absence of intergroup friendships due to a lack of shared interests with ethnic out-group members (Stark & Flache, 2012). In one study, non-Arab American 12- and 16-year-olds expected ethnic in-group members to include Arab American peers with whom they shared interests, but they expected that the Arab American peer group would prioritize in-group similarity, choosing to include an ethnic in-group member over an ethnic out-group member with shared interests (Hitti & Killen, 2015). Cumulatively, these studies highlight how children often accept in-group similarity as a valid reason for intergroup exclusion.

When it comes to direct racial bias as a justification for intergroup exclusion, specifically out-group dislike, previous research has found that Anglo-Australian children aged 5 to 12 years rated ethnic out-group members more negatively on trait attributes than ethnic in-group members (Griffiths & Nesdale, 2006). These children also reported not wanting to play with or live by ethnic out-group members (Griffiths & Nesdale, 2006). Other studies have found that having a group norm of exclusion can increase out-group dislike in Anglo-Australian and White Scottish children aged 5 to 9 years (Nesdale & Lawson, 2011; Nesdale et al., 2005). Together, this shows that children display direct racial bias in the form of out-group dislike in intergroup contexts and are likely to view it as an acceptable reason for intergroup exclusion, especially if they have been exposed to exclusive group norms.

Children can reject direct racial bias justifications

Although children personally display direct racial bias through out-group dislike and sometimes accept it as a legitimate reason for intergroup exclusion, they often reject direct racial bias as a justification for intergroup exclusion, especially when compared with justifications that do not reflect direct racial bias. Killen et al. (2007) found that 9- and 10-year-old American children from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds evaluated social exclusion due to racial group membership more negatively than non-race-based reasoning. Furthermore, American children see race-based social exclusion as less legitimate than social exclusion based on other forms of social group membership, with 9- and 10-year-olds from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds evaluating social exclusion based on racial group membership as being more wrong than exclusion based on gender (Killen et al., 2002). This research, along with prior research documenting that children can accept in-group similarity as a valid reason for intergroup exclusion (Hitti & Killen, 2015; Stark & Flache, 2012), suggests that children may evaluate same-race peer inclusion due to out-group dislike more negatively than due to in-group similarities. If this is the case, this also suggests that children may view an indirect racial bias justification as more legitimate than a direct racial bias justification. In addition, this may provide initial evidence that out-group dislike and in-group preference are not reciprocally related in American children.

Indirect racial bias in the form of peer and parental preference

Both parents and peers influence children's attitudes and behaviors in intergroup contexts. Peer preference plays a role in children's acceptance of intergroup exclusion in the form of peer group norms. Peer group norms that are biased or negative may contribute to bias-based behaviors and may inhibit children from calling out prejudiced attitudes (McGuire et al., 2015; Mulvey et al., 2016). Previous research has found that when in-group members express exclusive norms, White Anglo children aged 7 and 9 years express increased prejudice toward ethnic out-group members (Nesdale et al., 2005). Exclusive peer group norms are so influential that they may even work against inclusive norms from teachers and other authority figures who promote interracial contact (McGuire et al., 2015). Peers also function as agents for racial/ethnic socialization (Wang & Lin, 2023). It has been proposed that the mechanisms for peer racial/ethnic socialization include pressuring and reinforcing individuals to perform behavior that is consistent with the norms of that ethnic or racial group (Hughes et al., 2011). These group norms may include norms related to in-group inclusion and out-group exclusion. Peer racial/ethnic socialization occurs frequently by early adolescence (Chen et al., 2020; Wang & Benner, 2016). Therefore, in intergroup contexts, children are highly aware of indirect racial bias as transmitted through peer preference and often believe that it is a legitimate reason to engage in intergroup exclusion.

Indirect racial bias in the form of parental preference is also salient to children in intergroup peer exclusion contexts. Previous research has found that Asian American children and adolescents believe that parents are less likely to be inclusive of racial/ethnic out-group peers than peers are (Hitti et al., 2020). In addition, perceived parental attitudes were related to cross-race relationship behaviors in a sample of racially and ethnically diverse American adolescents (Edmonds & Killen, 2009). Messages from parents in intergroup scenarios may influence children's understanding of intergroup peer interactions and evaluations of intergroup exclusion, including same-race inclusion (Killen et al., 2007). Thus, children are cognizant of parental preference as a form of indirect racial bias in intergroup exclusion contexts and may accept it as a justification for intergroup exclusion.

Throughout childhood, parents and peers have distinct and separate influences on children's attitudes about intergroup peer exclusion. Parental messaging tends to be explicit and didactic, which is due in part to the nature of parent-child relationships (Perry et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2020; Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). For elementary school-age children in the United States, such as the 6- to 12-year-olds in the sample of the current study, parents exert a great amount of authority and control over their social lives (Hunter et al., 2012; Ladd & Parke, 2021). Conversely, messages from peers regarding intergroup exclusion may be more subtle or implicit and are often communicated in the form of group norms (McGuire et al., 2015; Mulvey et al., 2016). When compared with parent-child relationships, peer relationships are characterized by much greater equal status (Bukowski et al., 2018).

The status differences in children's relationships with their parents compared with their peers likely influence children's tendency to challenge or question expressions of bias around interracial interactions. In one recent study, Black and White American children aged 9 to 14 years predicted that interracial peer inclusion would be less likely to occur when parental sources of influence were present than when peer sources of influence were present (Burkholder et al., 2021). Children may believe that ignoring peers' preferences is more acceptable than ignoring a same-race inclusion preference from a parent (Burkholder et al., 2021; Killen et al., 2007). This suggests that children may evaluate same-race inclusion due to parental preference more positively than same-race inclusion due to peer preference and differentiate between different forms of indirect racial bias.

Target group identity

Children may also account for racial group membership when evaluating same-race inclusion justified by parental preference given that there are significant differences in the roles that Black and White parents play in preparing their children for interracial interactions in the United States. The robust literature on racial/ethnic socialization demonstrates that parents of color, including Black parents, commonly engage in practices to communicate information about race, discrimination, and identity to their children (Simon, 2021; Wang et al., 2019). Different types of messages frequently

transmitted to Black youths by their parents include messages that promote racial and cultural pride as well as messages that prepare youths for bias and discrimination they may face in the future (Huguley et al., 2019; Kurtz-Costes et al., 2019). Research shows that Black American parents prioritize racial/ethnic socialization as a means to strengthen their children's racial identity and resilience in a country where they often face discrimination, disempowerment, and mistreatment (Hughes et al., 2006; Perry, Abaied, et al., 2024).

Unlike Black parents, White parents rarely report engaging in racial/ethnic socialization practices with their children (Perry et al., 2019). Many White parents do not view race as an important topic to discuss with their children (Abaied & Perry, 2021; Perry, Abaied, et al., 2024), and some even report avoiding such discussions out of fear that they may make their children more prejudiced (Hagan et al., 2024). This lack of racial/ethnic socialization by White parents reflects a form of racial privilege given that White parents can choose not to engage in racial/ethnic socialization given their numeric majority status as well as their higher level of access to resources and opportunities than other racial groups. In contrast, many Black parents are compelled to engage in racial/ethnic socialization for the benefit, protection, and safety of their children (Perry, Abaied, et al., 2024). In addition, this lack of racial socialization by White parents reinforces societal messages regarding "Whiteness" as the unstated norm (Abaied, 2023). The lack of racial socialization by White parents may also indirectly communicate to their children that race is an improper topic to discuss and that there is something negative about individuals who are a different race, allowing for the development of racial bias (Vitrup, 2018).

When White parents do engage in racial/ethnic socialization, they often employ colorblind messaging, which conveys ideas that race is not important and everyone is the same (Perry et al., 2019). Research suggests that this approach is not necessarily effective in reducing racial bias (Perry et al., 2024). Instead, color-conscious socialization that acknowledges the history and ongoing effects of racism may be a more effective method for reducing bias (Perry, Wu, et al., 2024). In summary, racial/ethnic socialization practices between Black families and White families in the United States are qualitatively different, with White families rarely engaging in racial/ethnic socialization, in part due to their racial privilege.

Despite the frequent lack of racial/ethnic socialization in White families, White children still show awareness of racial bias and inequality at an early age, prior to starting elementary school (Elenbaas et al., 2020; Mandalaywala et al., 2020). One study by Elenbaas and Killen (2016) presented 5- and 6-year-old and 10- and 11-year-old Black and White American children with an inequality of necessary resources (i.e., medical supplies) between hospitals serving children of different racial groups and asked them to allocate new supplies to the hospitals. Older, but not younger, children rectified the resource inequality when a hospital serving African American children was disadvantaged, but not when a hospital serving European American children was disadvantaged (Elenbaas & Killen, 2016). There is also evidence that by the fifth grade, both Black and White American children are aware that Black individuals are more likely to have restricted access to necessary resources (e.g., school and medical supplies) than White individuals and apply this knowledge when evaluating a hypothetical resource inequality (Elenbaas & Killen, 2017). These findings suggest that beginning in middle childhood, children can factor contextual information about racial group membership, past intergroup relations, and societal inequalities into their decision-making in intergroup contexts.

Due to Black children's experiences of racial/ethnic socialization and past research on both Black American and White American children's recognition of racial bias and discrimination, there is reason to expect that children may evaluate same-race inclusion due to parental preference more positively when the includer is a Black child than when the includer is White. Black children may draw on the racial/ethnic socialization messages they have received from their parents and understand that Black parents may have legitimate reasons for wanting their children to engage with same-race rather than other-race children (e.g., avoiding potential bias and discrimination). Whereas previous research has shown that by late childhood White children can become aware of systemic biases and societal policies that are unfair (Elenbaas & Killen, 2016, 2017; Gönül et al., 2023; Killen et al., 2024). It is possible that White children may apply their understanding of the history of discrimination and broader societal inequalities that Black individuals in the United States face (e.g., Elenbaas & Killen, 2016, 2017).

Lastly, it is important to note that due to racial privilege and differential status, same-race inclusion between White and Black children may be associated with different developmental outcomes. For

racially and ethnically minoritized children, such as Black children within the context of the United States, same-race interactions and friendships have the potential to be important for positive development in childhood given that in-group friendships are associated with a stronger sense of ethnic identity (Graham et al., 2014). Whereas for White children preferring same-race inclusion has the potential to perpetuate existing status hierarchies based on racial group membership and can communicate negative attitudes about peers from minoritized racial groups (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Rutland & Killen, 2015).

Prior research has found that children use multiple forms of justifications—in-group similarity, out-group dislike, parental preference, and peer preference—to justify intergroup exclusion. Besides out-group dislike, these justifications reflect *indirect bias* rather than *direct bias*, and may contribute to in-group preference. In-group preferences may contribute to out-group bias in contexts that promote and uphold social hierarchies and inequalities (Kaufman & Killen, 2022). Little is known about how children evaluate these varied justifications for intergroup exclusion when they are directly compared with one another. Thus, the goal of the current study was to systematically investigate how Black and White American children evaluate forms of direct and indirect bias as justification for same-race inclusion and how their reasoning relates to their evaluations.

The current study

This study investigated 6- to 12-year-old Black and White American children's evaluations of vignettes involving a child including a same-race peer for a variety of different justifications, specifically (a) racial in-group similarity, (b) racial out-group dislike, (c) parental preference, and (d) peer preference. The varied justifications for same-race inclusion allowed us to examine whether children's evaluations of same-race inclusion differed between a direct racial bias justification and an indirect racial bias justification. It also allowed us to examine whether children's evaluations of same-race inclusion differed between indirect racial bias justifications that came from two distinct socializing agents, namely parents and peers.

We chose to investigate 6- to 12-year-olds to test for age-related patterns in evaluations of same-race inclusion because there is evidence that children in this developmental period differentially evaluate peer intergroup exclusion based on the excluder's justification (Killen et al., 2007) and attend to their peers' racial group membership in social contexts (Elenbaas & Killen, 2016). From 6 to 12 years of age, children also become more skilled at weighing multiple competing factors, such as racial group membership and mental state knowledge, when decision making and evaluating others' actions in social moral scenarios (Killen & Rutland, 2011; Smetana, 2011). Participant age was treated as a binary grouping variable, with younger children grouped as 6 to 9.49 years and older children grouped as 9.5 to 12 years. (For more information regarding sample age selection and treatment of age as a binary grouping variable, see [Supplementary Methods 1 in the online supplementary material](#).)

We recruited Black and White children in the United States given that children from majority and minority status groups can differ in inclusion preferences, behaviors, and evaluations due to differences in lived experiences. For example, children from racially minoritized groups, such as Black children in the United States, often have personal experiences with racial discrimination that their peers from majority status groups, such as White children in the United States, do not (Rivas-Drake et al., 2009). Thus, it is important to examine the perspectives of children from both majority status and minoritized groups. We specifically chose to recruit Black and White American children due to the fact that societal systems and structures (e.g., political, legal, economic, health care, school, criminal justice systems) advantage White Americans and disadvantage Black Americans (Braveman et al., 2022; Roberts & Rizzo, 2020). We also specifically chose to recruit Black and White Americans because historically most developmental and social psychological research on racism has been conducted in the United States on Black and White Americans (Roberts & Rizzo, 2020). Selecting these two groups for the study sample allowed for the use and comparison of a significant body of prior research and theory in discussing the results of the current study (Roberts & Rizzo, 2020).

To test our hypotheses, participants were shown two vignettes. In one vignette, a White child chose to include a same-race peer due to the four different justifications for intergroup exclusion listed above. In the other vignette, a Black child chose to include a same-race peer due to the same four justifications.

Hypotheses

Based on a review of the literature as well as the SRD model, we made the following predictions.

Evaluations of same-race inclusion due to in-group similarity and out-group dislike

We hypothesized that participants would evaluate justifications for same-race inclusion based on out-group dislike (direct bias) more negatively than justifications based on in-group similarity (indirect bias) (H1).

Evaluations of same-race inclusion due to parental preference and peer preference

We expected that participants would differentiate between different forms of indirect racial bias. Specifically, we expected that participants would evaluate justifications for same-race inclusion based on peer preference more negatively than justifications for same-race inclusion based on parental preference (H2).

In addition, we predicted that participants would evaluate justifications for same-race inclusion based on parental preference more positively when the includer was a Black child than when the includer was a White child (H3).

Evaluations of parental preference and participant reasoning

We hypothesized that participants who negatively evaluate parental preference as a justification for same-race inclusion would be more likely to use moral reasoning than non-moral reasoning. Conversely, we expected that participants who positively evaluated justifications for same-race inclusion based on parental preference would be more likely to use non-moral reasoning than moral reasoning (H4).

Participant age

We expected that for H1, H2, and H3 the older participants would evaluate the same-race inclusion more negatively than the younger participants (H5). With age, children become more skilled at weighing multiple factors when evaluating others' actions in social moral scenarios (Killen & Rutland, 2011; Smetana, 2011). Thus, older children may be better able to identify the possible negative impacts of same-race inclusion while still giving weight to the specific justification and other factors.

Method

Participants

Participants were 219 children aged 6 to 12 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 9.18$ years, $SD = 1.90$; 51% female and 49% male) who resided in the United States. Families were recruited from a preexisting online database established through the authors' lab and through online methods, including Facebook advertising, Facebook groups, and nextdoor.com (see [Tables S1 and S2 in the supplementary material](#) for the full description of sample demographics and sample zip code information). Sample size was determined with a priori power analyses using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009). Based on previous literature and expecting medium effects with $\alpha = .05$ and power = .80, a minimum of approximately 130 participants was necessary to test the hypotheses. This number was rounded up to include 200 participants to account for counterbalancing and potential exclusion from the final analyses due to reasons such as experimental error and attrition. The data were collected in 2021 and 2022.

Because racial group membership was of interest in this study, this sample was composed of two racial groups relevant to the stimuli in the study. About one third of the participants were Black ($n = 67$; $M_{\text{age}} = 9.47$ years, $SD = 1.94$) and about two thirds were White ($n = 152$; $M_{\text{age}} = 9.05$ years, $SD = 1.88$), as identified by parental report. We aimed to have a low-middle- to high-middle-income sample to avoid the race by income confound often reported in research studies.

Procedure and assessments

Procedure

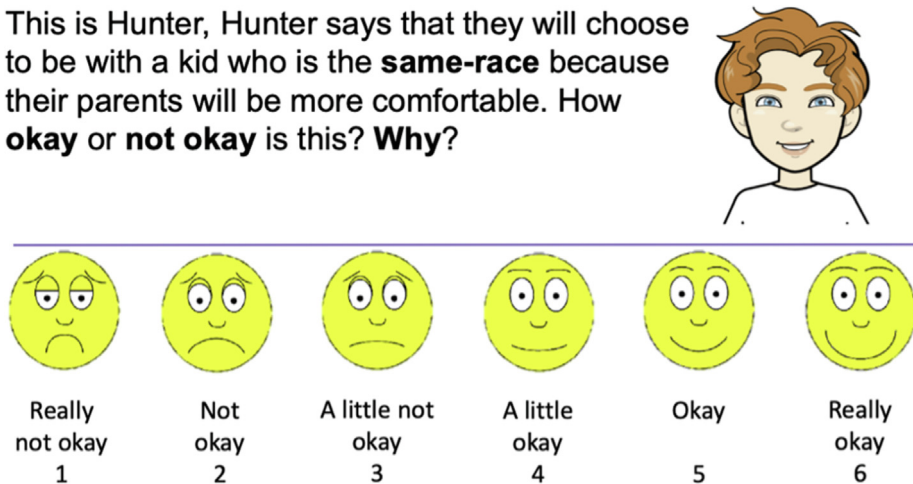
This project was approved by the institutional review board at the University of Maryland. All children received written parental consent to participate and gave verbal assent prior to administration of the study. Participants were individually interviewed over Zoom by a trained researcher using a laptop or desktop computer in a quiet place at home. Participants listened to the study instructions explained by the researcher, had an opportunity to ask any questions, and then began the interview. Children were first trained on how to use the Likert-type scale (for the training script, see [Supplementary Methods 2](#)). The interview was accompanied by a PowerPoint image that included brightly colored drawings of children and visual representations of the inclusion contexts ([Fig. 1](#)). All stimuli and measures were presented on a laptop or desktop computer. The interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 min.

Measures

Same-race inclusion justification task. Participants were asked to evaluate how “okay” or “not okay” it was for both a White target child and a Black target child to include a same-race peer for each of following justifications: (a) racial in-group similarity, (b) racial out-group dislike, (c) parental preference, and (d) peer preference. The White target child and Black target child were depicted by animated drawings with positive facial expressions (i.e., a smile) and the same white T-shirts. The stimuli used skin tone and hair styles to convey racial/ethnic differences in the characters. All participants separately evaluated same-race inclusion perpetrated by both a White target child and Black target child. The target characters were gender-matched to the participant, such that girls saw target characters who were girls and boys saw target characters who were boys.

For each of the following four measures, participants reported their evaluations on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*really not okay*) to 6 (*really okay*). This measure has previously been used in the intergroup developmental literature to assess children’s evaluations of social inequalities ([Elenbaas et al., 2016](#); [Sims et al., 2023](#)) and evaluations of peer intergroup exclusion ([Burkholder et al., 2020](#)). Scale responses 1, 2, and 3 were coded as 0 for the negative evaluation of same-race inclusion, and scale responses 4, 5, and 6 were coded as 1 for the positive evaluation of same-race inclusion for analyses that examined participant reasoning.

Same-race inclusion due to in-group similarity. Evaluations of same-race inclusion due to in-group similarity with a White target child and a Black target child were measured with the following



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Fig. 1. Note. This figure depicts the same-race inclusion due to parental preference justification task with a White target child.
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prompt: “[Includer character] says that they will choose to be with a kid who is the same-race because this way they would have more in common with who they pick. How okay or not okay is this?”

Same-race inclusion due to out-group dislike. Evaluations of same-race inclusion due to out-group dislike with a White target child and a Black target child were assessed with the following prompt: “[Includer character] says that they will choose to be with a kid who is the same-race because they don’t like kids who don’t look like them.”

Same-race inclusion due to parental preference. Evaluations of same-race inclusion due to parental preference with a White target child and a Black target child were measured with the following prompt: “[Includer character] says that they will choose to be with a kid who is the same-race because their parents will be more comfortable.”

Same-race inclusion due to peer preference. Evaluations of same-race inclusion due to peer preference with a White target child and a Black target child were assessed with the following prompt: “[Includer character] says that they will choose to be with a kid who is the same-race because it’s what their friends would want.”

Reasons for responses. Following same-race inclusion due to parental preference for both the White target child and the Black target child, justifications for responses were used to examine variance in reasoning by asking participants “Why?” The open-ended responses were coded using a validated coding system based on the SRD model (Rutland et al., 2010) and examination of the pilot data. The open-ended responses were coded into two primary reasoning categories established by the SRD model: (a) Moral Reasoning—focus on the moral considerations of equal treatment, fairness, and concern for others’ welfare (e.g., “Because with the other person who doesn’t have that color skin, that [social exclusion] would hurt their feelings”) and (b) Non-moral Reasoning—focus on non-moral considerations, such as the references to positive traits of individuals, peer and parental norms, and promoting social relationships based on physical similarities (e.g., “Maybe he [inclusion character] was really nice”). For responses that did not explain “why” participants gave their answer, an “other” category was created: (c) Other/Uncodable (e.g., “Because I don’t know”). Responses in the Other/Uncodable category were not included in the analyses. Missing reasoning data occurred in less than 2% of the sample and were not included in analyses. See Table 1 for the full descriptions and examples of the two primary coding categories.

Table 1
Descriptions and examples of reasoning coding scheme

Conceptual category	Definition	Example
Moral reasoning	References to fairness, equality, and mutual respect	“We should treat everyone equal.”
	Wrongfulness of racism, discrimination, and denial of rights	“Because that’s racist.”
	Benefits of inclusion and diversity	“Maybe they were interested and thought that it would be cool to get to know someone who might have a different culture from them.”
Non-moral reasoning	Friendship potential and positive attributions	“Because she looks nice, she might become their friend.”
	References to autonomy and independent decision making	“Because it does not matter what your friends think, it’s what you think.”
	Authority expectations and peer norms	“The parents probably have more decision-making power over the kids, so it would be okay for like the parents ... the parents could make decisions better.”
	Preferences for similarity due to physical appearance	“Because they all look closer alike when they choose him.”

Note. All examples listed in the table are verbatim responses from participants in the current study.

Among the 25% of responses ($n = 55$) analyzed for reliability, interrater reliability was achieved (Cohen's $\kappa = .82$) by two coders. (For more information on the data analytic approach, see [Supplementary Methods 3](#)).

Data analytic plan

This section outlines the data analytic plan for each analysis. To test all hypotheses except those related to participant reasoning, we conducted repeated-measures analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with SPSS Version 29 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). We conducted $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVAs with repeated measures on the last factor to test each of our hypotheses. For all analyses, we included participants' age. Race was coded as Black or White. Follow-up analyses included pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni adjustments to explain significant interactions.

To test our hypotheses related to participant reasoning, we conducted binomial logistic regressions predicting the use of the moral reasoning by evaluation of same-race inclusion due to parental preference (negative or positive), participant age, and participant race. We conducted separate logistic regressions predicting the use of moral reasoning for same-race inclusion due to parental preference with a White target child and a Black target child. For missing data, listwise deletion was used and missing data did not exceed 5.5% for any of the analyses reported in this article.

Results

Evaluations of same-race inclusion due to in-group similarity and out-group dislike

A main effect of same-race inclusion with a White target child was found, $F(1, 214) = 131.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .38$ (Fig. 2), with participants evaluating same-race preference due to out-group dislike as significantly less okay ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.55$) than same-race preference due to in-group similarities ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.67$), $p < .001$. This confirmed our hypothesis (H1). Children think that out-group

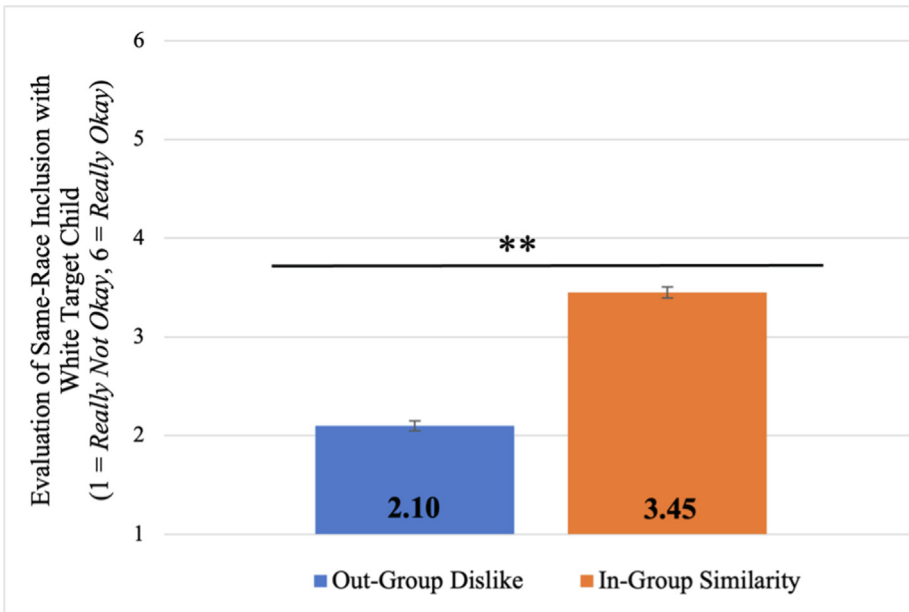


Fig. 2. Mean evaluation of same-race inclusion due to out-group dislike and in-group similarity with a White target child. $N = 218$. $**p < .01$.

dislike (direct racial bias) is a less acceptable justification for a White child to engage in same-race inclusion than in-group similarity (indirect racial bias).

A main effect of participant age was also found, $F(1, 214) = 26.24, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .11$. Older participants evaluated same-race inclusion preference with a White target child, averaged across out-group dislike and in-group similarity, more negatively ($M = 2.30, SD = 1.89$) than younger participants ($M = 3.25, SD = 1.95$). With age, children evaluate same-race inclusion due to out-group dislike and in-group similarity perpetrated by White children increasing negatively.

In addition, a main effect of same-race inclusion with a Black target child was found, $F(1, 213) = 120.99, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .36$ (Fig. 3), with participants evaluating same-race preference due to out-group dislike with a Black target child as significantly less okay ($M = 2.20, SD = 1.60$) than same-race preference due to in-group similarities ($M = 3.44, SD = 1.61$), $p < .001$. This supported our hypothesis (H1). Children think that out-group dislike (direct racial bias) is less acceptable a justification for a Black child to engage in same-race inclusion than in-group similarity (indirect racial bias).

A main effect of participant age was also found, $F(1, 213) = 19.39, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .08$; older participants evaluated same-race inclusion preference with a Black target child, averaged across out-group dislike and in-group similarity, more negatively ($M = 2.38, SD = 2.04$) than younger participants ($M = 3.27, SD = 2.13$). With age, children evaluate same-race inclusion due to out-group dislike and in-group similarity perpetrated by Black children increasing negatively.

Evaluations of same-race inclusion due to peer preference and parental preference

There was no main effect of same-race inclusion with a White target child, $F(1, 213) = 3.48, p = .063, \eta_p^2 = .02$. No significant differences in participants' evaluations of same-race inclusion due to peer

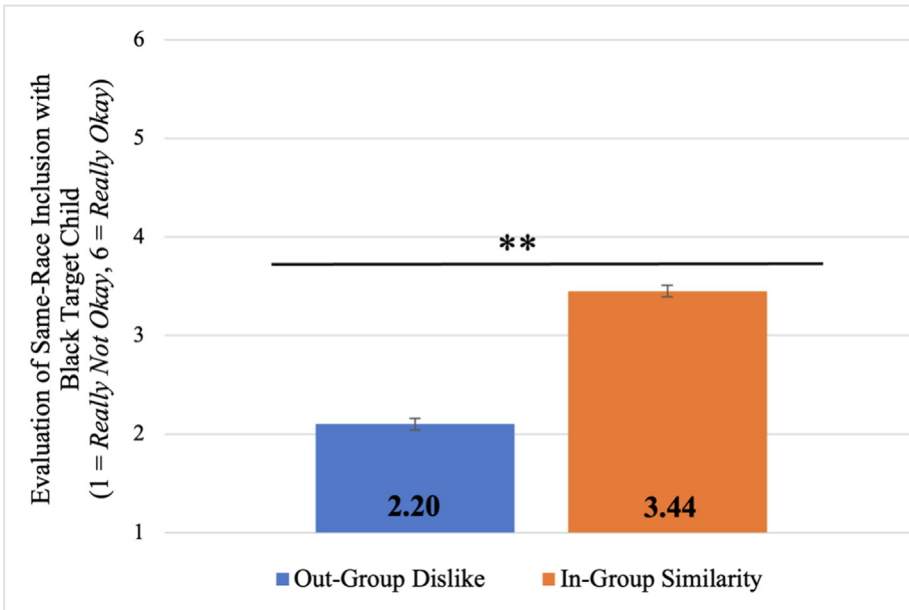


Fig. 3. Mean evaluation of same-race inclusion due to out-group dislike and in-group similarity with a Black target child. $N = 217$. ** $p < .01$.

preference with a White target child ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.64$) and same-race preference due to parental preference with a White target child ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.65$) were found. This finding was contrary to our hypothesis (H2).

However, a main effect of participant race was found, $F(1, 213) = 4.21$, $p = .041$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Black participants evaluated same-race inclusion preference with a White target child, averaged across peer preference and parental preference, more positively ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 2.04$) than White participants ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 2.44$), $p = .041$. This finding was unexpected and requires further research, as we discuss below.

A main effect of participant age was also found, $F(1, 213) = 22.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$; older participants evaluated same-race inclusion preference with a White target child, averaged across peer preference and parental preference, more negatively ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 2.04$) than younger participants ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 2.10$). With age, children evaluate same-race inclusion due to parental and peer preference perpetrated by White children increasing negatively.

Furthermore, a main effect of same-race inclusion with a Black target child was found, $F(1, 213) = 24.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$ (Fig. 4), with participants evaluating same-race preference due to peer preference as significantly less okay ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.65$) than same-race preference due to parental preference ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.63$), $p < .001$. This supported our hypothesis (H2). Children think that peer preference is a less acceptable justification for a Black child to engage in than same-race inclusion due to parental preference and differentiate between different forms of indirect racial bias that come from important socializing agents.

A main effect of participant age was also found, $F(1, 213) = 25.91$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. Older participants evaluated same-race inclusion preference with a Black target child, averaged across peer preference and parental preference, more negatively ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 2.04$) than younger participants ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 2.13$). With age, children evaluate same-race inclusion due to peer preference and parental preference perpetrated by Black children increasing negatively.

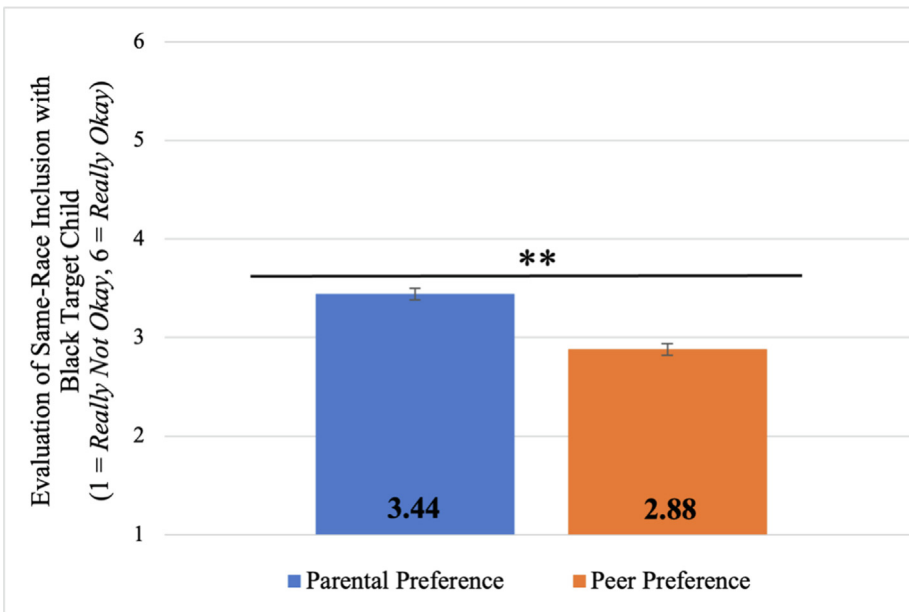


Fig. 4. Mean evaluation of same-race inclusion due to parental preference and peer preference with a Black target child. $N = 217$. ** $p < .01$.

Evaluations of same-race inclusion due to parental preference with a Black target child and a White target child

A main effect was found for target child race, $F(1, 212) = 13.74, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$ (Fig. 5), with participants evaluating same-race inclusion due to parental preference more positively when the target child was Black ($M = 3.45, SD = 1.69$) than when the target child was White ($M = 3.10, SD = 1.70$), thereby supporting our hypothesis (H3). Children are more supportive of same-race inclusion due to parental preference when the includer child is Black than when the includer child is White, although they evaluate same-race inclusion due to parental preference as slightly wrong regardless of includer race.

A main effect of participant age was also found, $F(1, 212) = 13.39, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09$. Older participants evaluated same-race inclusion preference due to parental preference, averaged across the White target child and the Black target child, more negatively ($M = 2.78, SD = 2.04$) than younger participants ($M = 3.77, SD = 2.24$). With age, children evaluate same-race inclusion due to parental preference increasing negatively regardless of includer child race.

Negative evaluation of same-race inclusion due to parental preference and moral reasoning

A main effect of evaluation of same-race inclusion due to parental preference on the use of moral reasoning with a White target child was found ($B = 3.28, p < .001$, odds ratio (OR) = 26.6, 95% confidence interval (CI) [-2.49, 4.17]). This finding provided support for our hypothesis (H4). Thus, the odds of a child who negatively evaluated same-race inclusion due to parental preference with a White peer using moral reasoning was 26.6 times the odds of a child who positively evaluated same-race inclusion due to parental preference with a White peer, all else being equal.

Negative evaluations of same-race inclusion due to parental preference with a Black target child were also associated with the use of moral reasoning ($B = 2.04, p < .001, OR = 7.70, 95\% CI [1.37, 2.77]$), supporting our hypothesis (H4). This indicates that the odds of a child who negatively evaluated same-race inclusion due to parental preference with a Black peer using moral reasoning are 7.70 times the odds of a child who positively evaluated same-race inclusion due to parental preference

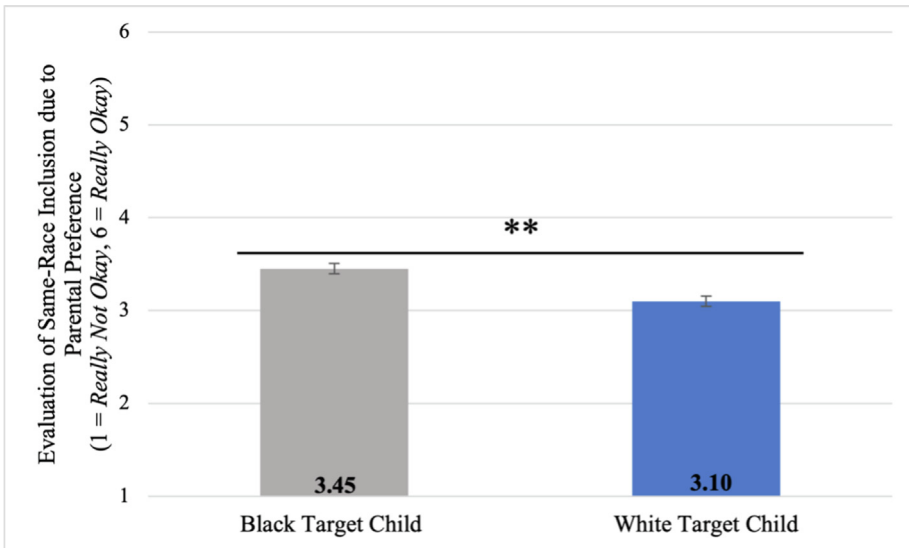


Fig. 5. Mean evaluation of same-race inclusion due to parental preference by target child race. $N = 216$. $**p < .01$.

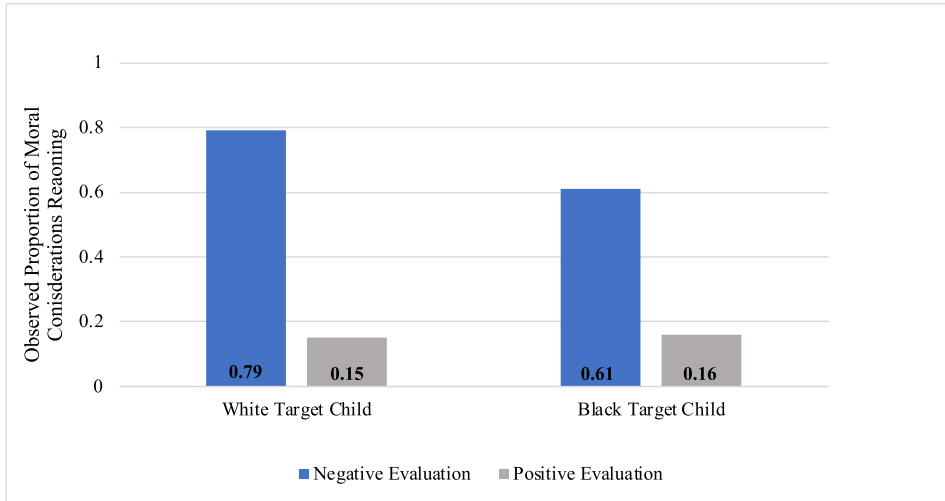


Fig. 6. Children's moral consideration reasoning for evaluation of same-race inclusion due to parental preference. $N = 207$.

with a Black peer, all else being equal. For the observed portions of moral reasoning used in participants' evaluations of same-race inclusion due to parental preference with a White target child and a Black target child, see Fig. 6.

Discussion

The current study investigated how Black and White American children aged 6 to 12 years evaluated direct and indirect bias as justifications for same-race inclusion and how their reasoning related to their evaluations. This study revealed several novel findings. First, children evaluated same-race inclusion due to out-group dislike more negatively than same-race inclusion due to in-group similarity with both a White peer and a Black peer. This may be motivated by children successfully identifying out-group dislike as a form of direct racial bias and thus evaluating it negatively. Children might not have viewed in-group similarity as a form of bias and instead focused on group functioning concerns and other non-moral concerns when evaluating it. This interpretation aligns with previous research motivated by the SRD model, which found that children and adolescents often negatively evaluate intergroup exclusion and inclusion decisions driven by explicit bias (Gönül et al., 2023) but are more likely to accept these behaviors when the scenarios are complex or ambiguous (Cooley et al., 2016).

This finding builds off previous research showing that children evaluate race-based exclusion more negatively than exclusion based on other social group memberships (Burkholder et al., 2020; Killen et al., 2002) and that children accept in-group similarity as a reason for intergroup exclusion (Hitti & Killen, 2015; Stark & Flache, 2012). This finding counters previous theories, such as Sherif's functional theory of intergroup behavior (Sherif, 1966; Sherif & Sherif, 1953), which argued that if an individual has an in-group preference, the person also must experience out-group prejudice. Rather, one possible interpretation of the current finding is that children can have in-group preferences, as demonstrated through their more positive evaluation of in-group similarity, while not having out-group prejudice, as shown through their negative evaluation of out-group dislike. This interpretation may provide further evidence for social identity development theory's proposition that out-group prejudice only develops under certain conditions (Nesdale & Lawson, 2011). This interpretation may also provide tentative evidence that out-group dislike and in-group preference are *not* reciprocally related in Black and White American children aged 6 to 12 years.

Even though children may personally display out-group dislike (Griffiths & Nesdale, 2006; Nesdale & Lawson, 2011), they may still disapprove of out-group dislike when they witness others using it to justify same-race inclusion. However, further research should be conducted to fully understand the implications of children's more positive evaluations of same-race inclusion based on out-group dislike in contrast to in-group similarity. Future studies can also investigate how children evaluate out-group dislike across a variety of social groups (e.g., ethnicity, nationality, disability status) to explore whether Black and White American children universally negatively evaluate out-group dislike as a justification for intergroup exclusion.

We found that children evaluated peer preference as a less legitimate justification for same-race inclusion than parental preference with a Black peer, but not for a White peer, which partially confirmed our hypothesis (H2). Regarding the Black peer, this finding may be due to Black children's understanding that Black parents may prefer same-race interactions for their children, as communicated via racial/ethnic socialization messages (Simon, 2021; Wang et al., 2019). Both Black and White children in the sample may have recognized the protective reasoning behind Black parents' desire for same-race interactions due to their awareness of the history of discrimination and the broader societal inequalities that Black individuals face in the United States (Elenbaas & Killen, 2016, 2017). This finding provides evidence that, in certain contexts, children accept parental preference as a more legitimate justification for same-race inclusion than peer preference.

This finding contradicts prior research that found no differences by includer race regarding White and Black American children's responses to vignettes depicting same-race inclusion with White and Black peers with parents present (Burkholder et al., 2021). The prior research focused on children's *predictions* of inclusion, not their evaluation of same-race inclusion that has already occurred, as was assessed in the current study. Includer racial group membership may be more salient when evaluating same-race inclusion that has already occurred as opposed to predicting same-race inclusion that *may* occur. Future research could directly explore whether children give more weight to includer racial group membership or other factors when predicting same-race inclusion versus evaluating same-race inclusion that is already occurring. Future research can also investigate evaluations of peer preference and parental preference in same-race inclusion during early adolescence given that this is a developmental period when parental supervision declines and peer approval is increasingly important (McGuire et al., 2019).

With a White peer, Black participants evaluated same-race inclusion preference, averaged across peer and parental preferences, as more acceptable than White participants. Black participants may have evaluated same-race inclusion as being more positive because they need to be more concerned than White participants about the negative repercussions of negatively evaluating the social decisions of a dominant out-group member. Alternatively, Black children may have thought that, by including a same-race peer, this meant that the White peer could not perpetuate biased behavior toward other Black children. Additional research is needed to fully understand this finding. Future research should investigate what motivates Black children to evaluate same-race inclusion by a White peer due to parental and peer pressure more positively than White children. For example, future studies could explore the potential roles that internalized racism, racial privilege, and a child's social group status may play in these evaluations.

Children evaluated same-race inclusion due to parental preference more positively with a Black peer than with a White peer. This may have occurred due to Black children receiving racial/ethnic socialization messages from their parents, specifically messages about pursuing same-race relationships to avoid potential bias and discrimination (Simon, 2021; Wang et al., 2019). This finding may also have been driven by both Black and White American children's awareness of racial bias and discrimination. Participants may have drawn on their understanding of the history of discrimination and intergroup relations experienced by Black families in the United States in their evaluations. Prior research has shown that both Black and White American children are capable of applying their knowledge of historical discrimination and current inequities experienced by marginalized groups in their evaluations of intergroup contexts by middle childhood (Elenbaas & Killen, 2016, 2017).

The current finding connects to our previous finding that children differentiated their evaluations of same-race inclusion due to parental and peer preference with a Black peer, but not with a White peer, likely due to their positive evaluation of parental preference with a Black peer. These two

findings together highlight that children take in-group racial group membership into account when evaluating forms of indirect racial bias, specifically parental preference. These findings build off prior research documenting that many Black American children receive messages from their parents and caregivers to prepare them for bias and discrimination (Huguley et al., 2019; Kurtz-Costes et al., 2019). Both of these findings are supported by SRD, with participants giving consideration to multiple forms of knowledge in their evaluations. Specifically, participants gave weight to both psychological knowledge, in the form of the different justifications for the same-race inclusion, and group identity knowledge, in the form of the racial group membership of the in-group. Recent research has shown that parents from different racial/ethnic backgrounds prefer their children to play with same-race and same-ethnicity peers (Elenbaas et al., 2024). Future research can further explore why children believe parents have same-race inclusion preferences for their children and whether these reasons vary by parents' racial/ethnic group memberships.

Participants who rejected parental preference as a justification for same-race inclusion were more likely to use moral reasoning than non-moral reasoning. Participants who accepted parental preference as a legitimate justification for same-race inclusion were more likely to use non-moral reasoning than moral reasoning. This was found for both a Black peer and a White peer. Participants' moral reasoning may reflect their recognition of same-race inclusion due to parental preference as a moral concern given that it can contribute to intergroup exclusion, especially when perpetrated by White children. Participants who used non-moral reasoning might not have identified the possible negative outcomes of same-race inclusion due to parental preference and thus evaluated it positively. These participants may have seen only the "positive" act of a peer being inclusive and mindful of his or her parents' preferences. This finding aligns with previous research that found that children and adolescents often use moral reasoning when rejecting different forms of intergroup exclusion (Gönül et al., 2023; Rutland & Killen, 2015). This finding shows that moral reasoning is influential in children's evaluations of more complex intergroup exclusion and inclusion scenarios.

The relation between children's evaluations and their use of moral reasoning was found for both a White peer and a Black peer despite a difference in how children evaluated same-race parental preference between a White peer and a Black peer. Thus, in-group race was salient in evaluations of same-race inclusion due to parental preference but did not significantly affect the relation between children's evaluations and their reasoning. Future research should investigate the role of moral reasoning in evaluating other forms of indirect racial bias, such as in-person and virtual microaggressions. These results provide an avenue for future intervention. Learning more about how intergroup exclusion is a moral issue that results in harm to others may increase children's desire to participate in positive cross-race interactions. A direction for further research would be targeting children's and adolescents' abilities to successfully identify different forms of intergroup exclusion and the negative effects of intergroup exclusion as potential mechanisms for change.

We found that children evaluated *all* justifications for same-race inclusion more negatively with age. One interpretation of this is that, with age, children became better at identifying how same-race inclusion can contribute to intergroup exclusion, and thus they evaluate all the justifications for same-race inclusion more negatively. Furthermore, this finding extends prior research that found that racial bias can begin to develop around 3 years of age and is evident by 7 years (Geraci et al., 2024). It is possible that, after 7 years of age, children's racial bias begins to decrease, at least in certain contexts such as evaluating different justifications for same-race inclusion. It is also possible that, after 7 years of age, children become more aware of social norms against explicit expression of both direct and indirect racial bias. This finding also reflects a novel extension for research conducted from the SRD model by possibly showing that, with age, more children are able to successfully identify same-race inclusion's general potential for intergroup exclusion while differentially evaluating the specific justifications.

Regardless of age, however, children differentially evaluated justifications for same-race inclusion. Whereas younger children evaluated out-group dislike more positively than older children, younger children also evaluated out-group dislike more negatively than the in-group similarity. This age-related finding is novel regarding children's evaluations of same-race inclusion. Future research could explore children's evaluations of other justifications for same-race inclusion across the current sample age range to see whether there are justifications where children's evaluations do not change,

or even increase, with age. Justifications based more directly on group functioning concerns may be more positively evaluated with age given that group functioning concerns become increasingly important in evaluations of intergroup inclusion and exclusion during adolescence (McGuire et al., 2019; Rutland et al., 2010).

Limitations and future directions

The current study is a first step toward understanding how children evaluate justifications for same-race inclusion that reflect direct and indirect racial bias and socializing agents that influence children's evaluations of intergroup encounters. In the current study, about one third of the participants were Black American children and about two thirds were White American children. Future research on children's evaluations of same-race inclusions that focus on Black and White American children should endeavor to have more evenly distributed samples so as to better understand children's evaluations of same-race inclusion that might reveal participant race differences for justifications. Black and White American children were chosen for the current study due to unique and significant cultural and historical context of these two groups and their intergroup relations within the United States as well as the corresponding substantial body of psychological research. The current study is an initial step in deepening understanding regarding children's evaluations of in-group inclusion based on social group membership.

It is important to note that children's evaluations may differ when judging same-race or same-ethnicity inclusion enacted by other racial or ethnic groups in the United States or in-group inclusion of different social groups like wealth status and religion. It is vital for future studies to explore children's evaluations of same-race and same-ethnicity inclusion with other marginalized racial and ethnic groups as well as other social groups so as to gain a deeper understanding of children's evaluations of in-group inclusion.

Reasoning data were collected only for same-race inclusion evaluation due to parental preference. Future research should collect data on the reasoning underlying children's evaluations of same-race exclusion due to out-group dislike, in-group preference, and peer preference to shed more light on children's understanding of these concepts. In addition, in the current study, a general inclusion scenario was depicted in the vignette. This was necessary because it allowed us to investigate the effects of the different justifications for same-race inclusion, the includer child's racial/ethnic membership, and participant age. Future research can look at children's evaluations of same-race inclusion across a variety of more specific contexts (e.g., STEM [science, technology, engineering, and math] contexts) to better understand the influence of context on children's evaluations of same-race inclusion. Future research can also look at children's evaluations of same-race inclusion across a variety of high- and low-intimacy scenarios. Recent research has shown that children's predictions of cross-race inclusion and evaluations of cross-race exclusion vary between low- and high-intimacy social contexts (Luken Raz & Killen, 2024), so this variance may extend to children's evaluation of same-race inclusion. Lastly, new avenues for research can include exploring evaluations of same-race inclusion with children younger than 6 years so as to better understand how children's evaluations of same-race inclusion vary across childhood. For example, there is some evidence that babies and toddlers expect others to treat those who are similar to them (e.g., their in-group) well and to treat those who are not similar to them (e.g., their out-group) poorly (Geraci & Franchin, 2021; Hamlin et al., 2013), suggesting that younger children may also positively evaluate same-race inclusion due to in-group similarity.

The stimuli of the current study did not include depictions of the includer child's friends or parents, leaving participants to make assumptions about their racial and ethnic identities. Future research could explicitly ask children what racial/ethnic identities they assume the includer child's friends and parents to have and see whether participants' evaluations of peer preference and parental preference differ based what racial/ethnic group membership they assume the includer's peers and parents to have.

The central goal of the study was to focus on children's social cognitive evaluations of direct and indirect racial biases. Therefore, we did not include measures that assessed participants' racial/ethnic socialization experiences. Future studies could explicitly explore how children's racial/ethnic socialization experiences influence their evaluation of intergroup exclusion, including same-race inclusion,

as well as how different forms of racial/ethnic socialization may have differing impacts. Future research could also explore how different forms of racial/ethnic socialization and racial group membership possibly interact to influence evaluations of intergroup exclusion.

Conclusions

This study investigated 6- to 12-year-old Black and White U.S. children's evaluations of same-race inclusion across a variety of justifications that reflected direct and indirect racial bias as well as two distinct socializing agents, namely parents and peers. The study shed light on how children's support for same-race inclusion differs between justifications that reflect direct and indirect bias, as well as justifications that reflect parental and peer preference, and being part of a majority- or minority-status group may influence why an individual engages in same-race inclusion. The responses of children may also reveal the important role that moral reasoning plays in identifying instances of intergroup exclusion and rejecting it. With age, children evaluated all justifications for same-race inclusion more negatively but still differentiated between the different justifications in their evaluations. Understanding how different justifications influence desires to stay within one's racial in-group versus interacting with racial out-group members is a necessary step for reducing biased interracial attitudes and promoting positive cross-race friendships in childhood.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Kate V. Luken Raz: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Marley B. Forbes:** Writing – review & editing. **Melanie Killen:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary material to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2025.106221>.

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