Future Directions

Future Directions: Social Development in the Context of Social Justice
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Abstract
Many societies and cultures have become increasingly diverse and heterogeneous over the past decade. This diversity has a direct bearing on social justice in children’s and adolescents’ social development. Increased diversity can have positive consequences, such as the possibility for increased empathy, tolerance, perspective taking, and the celebration of various cultural traditions and values, but it can also result in increased prejudice, bias, and discrimination. In this article, we suggest that incorporating a focus on social justice can transform the field of social development. This can be done by considering the larger societal context of diversity or heterogeneity when investigating children’s peer interactions, attitudes, group identity, and social experience. In addition, new findings that incorporate social justice concerns have implications for designing interventions to enhance children’s healthy social development. We highlight and discuss recent areas of research that bear on this perspective and discuss avenues for future research and investigation.

Keywords: social cognition; social justice; exclusion; inter-group attitudes; stereotyping; prejudice

Introduction
Due to increased mobility, migration patterns, and global communication, many societies and cultures have become increasingly diverse and heterogeneous over the past two decades (Brown & Gaertner, 2001; Levy & Killen, 2008; Verkuyten, 2008). Children come in contact with individuals from diverse backgrounds early in life, and this diversity has a direct bearing on their developing views of self, others, friendships, and family. Researchers studying social groups have shown that comparisons with others emerge early in development due to developing conception of groups and the accompanying distinctions between in-group and out-group members (Abrams & Rutland, 2008; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Forming a group identity appears to be basic to human societies (Appiah, 2005), and even nonhuman primate societies (see Correspondence should be addressed to Melanie Killen, University of Maryland, Department of Human Development, 3304 Benjamin Building, College Park 20742, MD, USA. Email: mkillen@umd.edu

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de Waal, 1996). How individuals incorporate newly encountered cultural, ethnic, and religious groups into their group identity, however, is a complex process that has implications for morality, or how we treat one another (Appiah, 2005). More generally, the emergence of group identity and morality in the context of increased diversity has a bearing on many aspects of social development.

Further, determining what makes a ‘diverse’ environment in children’s lives, particularly in school settings, is complex. Approaches have ranged from measuring individual and dyadic variables, such as the extent of cross-race or cross-ethnic friendships, and individuals’ perception of the group variables, such as school composition and the classroom environment (Aboud, Mendolsohn, & Purdy, 2003; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006; Mendoza-Denton & Page-Gould, 2008; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). Increased diversity has positive consequences, such as the possibility for increased empathy, tolerance, perspective taking, and the celebration of various cultural traditions and values, but it also potentially has negative consequences in terms of increased prejudice, bias, and discrimination. Thus, on the one hand, identification with social groups is a necessary and adaptive process of being a member of a culture and society. On the other hand, group identification often perpetuates in-group/out-group comparisons that in turn promote negative attitudes, such as stereotypes (assumptions about the homogeneity of the out-group), prejudice, and discrimination (see Brown & Gaertner, 2001). Group identification, then, although adaptive, can also lead to conditions of social injustice. A central theme of this article is that the process of becoming a member of a culture has implications for social justice and that focusing on social justice is relevant for and can enhance the study of many areas of social development.

Social justice in the context of social developmental research includes: (1) the developmental emergence of the awareness of social injustice, (2) the awareness that unfair treatment is wrong (and why), (3) the extent to which children’s judgments perpetuate prejudicial outcomes (such as stereotyping and bias), (4) the ways in which children’s social development is hindered by being the recipient of unfair treatment, and (5) the social contexts that hinder or facilitate an awareness of social justice. These aspects of social justice cover a wide swathe of social developmental research, ranging from how children’s beliefs and attitudes might contribute to injustice and its emergence to the experiences of being the recipients of injustice and recognizing what makes it wrong. Surprisingly, each of these dimensions reflects relatively recent aspects of how social development is conceptualized and investigated. We will first briefly identify three areas of research, moral development, developmental inter-group attitudes, and culture, that have begun to focus on social justice, and then focus more specifically on children’s social cognition about social relationships (peer groups and hierarchies), areas of research that we propose could benefit from examining social developmental phenomena from the perspective of social justice.

Moral Development

Moral development is perhaps one of the most obvious areas of research for considering social justice. Whereas justice has been the focus of moral developmental research for half a century, beginning with Piaget (1932/1965) and Kohlberg (1984), only in the past decade have developmental scientists specifically focused their research on social justice problems or explicitly investigated children’s and adolescents’ evaluations of social relationships from a social justice viewpoint (Killen & McKown, 2005; Killen & Smetana, 2006; Lerner, 2004; McLoyd, 2006; Moshman,
As pointed out by Moshman, “social justice” differs from “justice” in that the former includes an awareness of societal treatment of others from a justice perspective, which is distinct from how one views just treatment of others’ (2008, p. 279).

Nussbaum (1999), a political philosopher, makes a strong case for the necessity of theorizing about social justice. She argues that abstract conceptions of fairness, which have traditionally neglected issues of social hierarchies, power, and status, must address these aspects of human relationships. Further, Appiah (2005), a moral philosopher, asserts that traditional philosophy has ignored essential aspects of human life, such as ethnic identity and cultural memberships in the search for a theory of justice. Consistent with these arguments, recent moral development researchers have studied children’s concepts of freedom and democracy (Helwig, 2008), social inequalities (Wainryb et al., 2008), exclusion (Killen, Sinno, & Margie, 2007), hierarchical roles in cultures (Turiel, 2002), sexual prejudice (Horn, 2008), educational inequalities (Nucci, 2001), and ethnic minority perspectives on autonomy (Smetana, 2002).

**Inter-group Relations**

Research on developmental inter-group relationships also has refocused its orientation toward social justice. Social developmental scientists have collaborated with social psychologists with the aim of investigating the origins of prejudice in adulthood. Together, they have studied the emergence of bias and stereotyping in childhood (Aboud & Amato, 2001; Brown & Bigler, 2005; Levy & Killen, 2008; Liben & Bigler, 2002; Quintana & McKown, 2007; Rutland, Abrams, & Levy, 2007). Drawing on social psychological theories, developmental psychologists interested in inter-group relationships have expanded their research by studying constructs such as prejudice, discrimination, implicit bias, explicit inter-group bias, stigma, unfair treatment, stereotype threat, social identity, and common in-group identity (see Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004; Levy & Killen, 2008; Quintana & McKown, 2007).

**Culture**

An emerging trend among cultural anthropologists is to move away from theoretical perspectives that view cultures in terms of their coherence, consistency, and uniform orientations, as implied by constructs such as individualism or collectivism, to conceptualize cultures in terms of their diversity, oppositions, and conflicts (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Appiah, 2005; Nussbaum, 1999; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). A number of anthropologists have begun to describe individuals within cultures, including traditional cultures, in terms of their conflicts, struggles, and attempts to transform social practices. These anthropologists have critiqued cultural psychology as having focused too much on individuals in dominant positions and neglected the perspectives of individuals in subordinate positions (Turiel, 2002). This has had implications for understanding the role of culture in children’s lives.

In turn, the focus on individuals at the bottom of the social hierarchy has revealed that concerns with social justice are often evident (for instance, among women in hierarchical societies), and that individuals in this position may contest or resist their social conditions to attain desired goals (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Mernissi, 1994). This is not limited to individuals in traditional societies, however. Research has shown that similar processes occur in American families, where gender roles are unequal (Okin,
1989). Investigations of children’s social interactions, attitudes, and relationships along these lines of inquiry have provided new findings that have the potential to transform the field of social development, as well as the goals for interventions designed to enhance children’s healthy development.

Social Cognition and Social Justice

Peer interactions bear on social justice when children treat each other differently due solely to characteristics, such as gender, race, or ethnicity. This is because children who make attributions about others, or who use categories such as gender, race, and ethnicity to determine with whom to play and be friends with, end up perpetuating behavior and attitudes that lead to social injustice (Aboud & Amato, 2001; Brown & Bigler, 2005; Quintana & McKown, 2007). Conversely, children who reject expectations based solely on group membership categories and who are decidedly inclusive promote attitudes and behaviors that lead to social justice (Killen et al., 2007). Moreover, children who are recipients of negative expectations from others due solely to their group membership are at risk for unhealthy social development (Fisher, Jackson, & Villarruel, 1998). What do we know about these dimensions of children’s peer interactions and relationships?

Several areas of recent research have provided findings that address these issues. As one example, researchers have developed indirect measures of children’s attributions of intentions in peer encounters using a modification of the standard hostile attribution bias paradigm developed by social information processing researchers (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004; Crick & Dodge, 1996; Stewart, West, & Coplan, 2007). In the standard paradigm, which has generated many important findings regarding children’s social cognition, children are asked to attribute intentions (‘What happened and why did he/she do that?’) in hypothetical scenarios depicting ambiguous peer encounters (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Dodge, 1985). The findings reveal differences for children who are reactive or proactive aggressors, with the former more likely to overattribute hostile intentions.

In these studies, the perpetrator’s race is usually controlled, so that within a stimulus story, all characters are the same race (although across stories, different races are portrayed); often, the stories are illustrated with black and white line drawings in which the race of the characters is ambiguous or not explicitly identified. New research has employed a variation of this paradigm. The race of the potential perpetrator was varied, such as depicting a European American vs. an African American child as the potential transgressor (for instance, in pushing another child off a swing; Margie, Killen, Sinno, & McGlothlin, 2005; McGlothlin & Killen, 2006; McGlothlin, Killen, & Edmonds, 2005). When children attribute negative intentions (e.g., ‘she pushed him down’) instead of positive intentions (e.g., ‘she will help him up’) as a function of the perpetrator’s race, this judgment, hypothetically speaking, reflects a racial bias potentially unknown to the participant. Recent findings with six- and nine-year old children have shown that young European American majority children with little inter-group contact (contact with members of the out-group) are more likely to display a negative racial bias than are European American or ethnic minority children with high contact (see Killen, 2007).

One could argue that racial biases are a form of social deficiency, given that it is an error in judgment. Yet in most analyses of racial attitudes, biases are not viewed as evidence of poor social skills or a social skills deficit. Instead, these biases are viewed as a normative—but undesirable—response. This is because large segments of society may display such biases, and researchers interpret these biases as stemming from societal expectations and messages about inclusion and exclusion. Recent inter-group
research with adults, however, has examined how social status and hierarchical arrangements in cultures lead to stereotyping and in-group bias (Banaji, Baron, Dunham, & Olson, 2008; Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Mendoza-Denton, Pietrzak, & Downey, 2008). Inter-group attitudes are viewed as an outcome of group identity and cultural messages, with often negative consequences for individuals at the low end of the hierarchy. This approach differs from one that focuses on personality deficits as the source of peer conflict and peer rejection. The implication for peer relationships research in social development is that group dynamics, status, and hierarchies within the peer world should be more closely examined to understand the origins of inter-group attitudes, stereotyping, and exclusion.

These findings also raise questions about the meaning of research using the standard hostile attribution bias paradigm. For example, if majority European American children are attributing negative intentions to peers based on ethnicity then ethnic minority children who are diagnosed as displaying a ‘hostile attribution bias’ (e.g., evidence of poor social skills) may simply be recounting their own experiences. That is, they may be the recipients of negative expectations by European American majority children. Using the same measure as in McGlothlin and Killen (2006), McGlothlin et al. (2005), and Margie et al. (2005) found that ethnic minority children did not use race to attribute intentions in ambiguous inter-racial peer encounters. Moreover, ethnic minority children were more likely to expect that inter-racial dyads could be friends than were majority children (enrolled in either homogeneous or heterogeneous schools). The research to date has focused on ethnic minority vs. majority children, but the same principles may apply to immigrant children, as opposed to children of later generations.

By describing attribution bias findings using versions of hypothetical stories and hypothetical peers that vary by race, we are not implying that race is the only variable that children use when making attributions about the intentions of others. After all, in actual interactions, a number of variables come into play, including past histories with and knowledge about peers, and observations of peers in actual encounters. Even within the standard hostile attribution paradigm, a range of variables have been shown to be relevant. For example, Peets, Hodges, Kikas, and Salmivalli (2007) showed that children were more likely to attribute negative intentions towards ‘enemies’ than toward other ‘peers’. Nonetheless, the fact that group membership categories, such as race and ethnicity, appear to be significant contributors to hostile attribution bias is relevant for our effort to connect these findings to concerns with social justice and to advocate for more research connecting these aspects of children’s peer relationships.

In fact, a consequence of being the recipient of negative bias may be a heightened sensitivity about attributions of intentions. One implication of these findings, then, is that the ethnicity of the potential perpetrator in ambiguous picture assessments of hostile attribution bias should be systematically controlled. In addition, judgments about same race vs. inter-racial (or immigrant vs. non-immigrant) encounters could be compared, and the group climate (peer group, classroom, school) should be investigated. These findings indicate that the larger cultural and ethnic context of social interaction must be considered to fully understand the motives that underlie peer exclusion and peer rejection.

Group Identity, Social Experience, and Social Justice

In support of this view, and, as an example, Nesdale’s (Nesdale, 2004, 2008; Ojala & Nesdale, 2004) research on peer rejection and prejudice points to the connection
between peer rejection processes and inter-group relationships. Using a variant of the minimal group paradigm from social psychology (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), in which group identities are created in a lab setting (e.g., the talented art group and the not-so-talented art group), Nesdale showed that peer group rejection has a direct role on inter-group prejudice. In his studies, children expressed inter-group prejudice toward the rejecting group after they were led to believe they were rejected by that group. Nesdale suggested that peer rejection increases anxiety and negative affect independent from decreasing self-esteem. Thus, Nesdale’s research demonstrates how shifting group memberships (of any type that involves status) result in changes in social attitudes. Being the recipient of exclusion or rejection has negative connotations for group dynamics, and the acquisition of prejudicial attitudes towards the out-group.

To add further complexity, Abrams and Rutland (2008) have shown that deviance can be relative to one’s identity with the group. Rather than characterizing deviance as a behavioral trait, these researchers have investigated how loyalty (or disloyalty) to group norms determines deviance among children in peer groups. That is, children often reject an out-group member who supports the norms of his or her group. Thus, understanding group dynamics requires studying processes of rejection, norms of the group, group identity, and the reasons for justifying decisions to exclude others.

The consequences of being rejected or excluded based on group membership extend beyond friendship and peer relations into the academic arena. Steele, Spencer, and Aronson (2002) have investigated the consequences of being a recipient of stereotypic expectations regarding academic performance. Their research shows that ‘stereotype threat’ lowers academic performance. This phenomenon has been demonstrated with children as well (McKown & Weinstein, 2003), revealing that children in middle childhood who identify with groups that are recipients of negative stereotypic expectations are negatively affected, as assessed on academic performance measures, by these expectations. These findings suggest that from a social justice perspective, it is important to investigate the school social environment, including whether there are situations in which peers are expecting other children to act in a manner inferred solely by group membership. Researchers also should consider the consequences of being the recipient of attributional bias in the school context and its effect on academic motivation and achievement.

As demonstrated by Liben and Bigler (2002), these questions are relevant for girls’, as well as for ethnic minority groups’ social development and motivation. Negative stereotypic expectations about girls’ potential for success in male-dominated occupations remain pervasive (Liben & Bigler, 2002). Moreover, research with adult females has shown that ‘stereotype threat’ exists in science and engineering (Murphy, Steele, & Gross, 2007). Thus, social developmental expectations in childhood may be related to adult academic and professional opportunities and achievements.

These findings have implications for the development of intervention programs and curricula designed to facilitate social skills. The aims of such programs may differ depending on the target and context of rejection and exclusion. The temperament and personality deficits approach stemming from Dodge’s work (Coie & Dodge, 1998) suggests that the focus should be on helping aggressive children and victims to correctly read social cues and react appropriately in conflict situations (Bierman, 2004). Intervention programs based on this model have been effective for helping children who have deficiencies in social skills and social competence.

The research on inter-group bias and prejudice reviewed here indicates, however, that interventions also should focus on the expectations and norms of the group, the
issues of fairness and justice regarding inter-group treatment, and the consequences of exclusion decisions based on group membership, with the biases that often accompany such decisions. One example of this approach has been the Child Development Project, which focuses on the whole community rather than only individuals within the school context (Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000). We would argue for taking intervention a step further and focusing on the subtle and implicit ways in which negative messages about group identity and membership lead to prejudice, bias, and discrimination. Further, particularly as a result of current hot topic issues in education, including the achievement gap and academic motivation, much of the research on ethnic minority children has focused on their social deficits. A similar argument can be made about gender, particularly with respect to the achievement gap in the area of math and science.

Yet the research reviewed here suggests that without an understanding of intra-group and inter-group dynamics, intervening at the individual level of children’s development remains incomplete. It is important and informative to also consider analyses of the larger social context, including peer relationships. Research has demonstrated links between the quality of peer relationships and long-term social adjustment and healthy development (Mendes, Gray, Mendoza-Denton, Major, & Epel, 2007). Minority adolescents who experience discrimination and exclusion are at risk for depression and stress (for a review, see Fisher et al., 1998), which, in turn, negatively affects the quality of their peer relationships. Girls who experience low expectations based on gender in the areas of math and science are vulnerable to low achievement in these important realms of academic competence (Arthur, Bigler, Liben, Gelman, & Ruble, 2008).

Research has shown that inter-group contact contributes to healthy social relationship and development. Adolescents who have positive contact with peers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, for example, are more likely to feel safe in schools (Juvonen et al., 2006), use more moral reasoning to reject exclusion based on race (Crystal, Killen, & Ruck, 2008), and have more high quality cross-ethnic friendships (Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). Having friends from other ethnic backgrounds also reduces prejudice, and leads to rejection of stereotypic messages that are associated with groups. Thus, providing positive social experiences for children in schools is a fundamental part of the goal of reducing prejudice and enabling children to develop positive peer relationships.

It is particularly important to reduce prejudice in childhood, before stereotypes become deeply entrenched (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1991). Many studies have found that cross-group friendships decrease with age (Aboud et al., 2003; McGlothlin, Edmonds, & Killen, 2007). Thus, investigating and understanding peer relationships in the context of inter-group relationships and attitudes is an important goal for future research.

The points discussed here regarding peer relationships are also relevant for more hierarchical relationships, such as parent–child relationships. Recently, research on authority and parent–child relationships has demonstrated that social justice enters into this dynamic. Rather than passively adopting parental norms, children are critical of parental and societal messages about exclusion, and often challenge authority by rejecting values that come in conflict with their own understanding of social justice.

Hierarchical Relationships and Social Justice

Research from the socialization perspective has stressed the importance of children’s willing compliance with parental rules as a marker of successful socialization (Grusec,
In Piaget’s (1932/1965) early and influential work on moral judgment development, he also asserted that young children (up until early adolescence) were heteronomous with respect to adult authority. That is, Piaget argued that children had unilateral respect for and viewed moral precepts as stemming from adult authority. As others (Helwig, 2008; Smetana, 2005) have noted, however, a great deal of recent research indicates that young children are not bound by adult or parental authority, nor do they evaluate events strictly on this basis. This is most clearly evident in studies where children have been asked to evaluate hypothetical instances where adults ask children to commit immoral acts (such as stealing or hurting) that have consequences for others’ welfare, or where they are asked to evaluate events that children view as outside the realm of legitimate adult authority. In the former studies, children reject the legitimacy of adult authority (Damon, 1977; Laupa & Turiel, 1986) and affirm others’ welfare or rights. In an elegant study, Helwig and Jasiobedzka (2001) asked elementary school-age children to evaluate hypothetical unjust laws (entailing age discrimination or denial of access to medical care or education). They found that across ages, children viewed these laws negatively, and evaluated it as acceptable to violate them, based on concerns with others’ rights and welfare. Thus, this research indicates that children reject parental and adult messages that conflict with moral norms. Young children are aware of discrimination and judge it as unacceptable, even when it is legislated by adults. Children of all ages also reject adult authority when they view the requests as pertaining to matters that children view as personal choices that are not legitimately regulated by adults (for instance, their choice of friends).

Other research has shown that minorities inevitably and pervasively encounter discrimination based on race (Garcia Coll et al., 1996), and evidence has been growing that exposure to discrimination during childhood and adolescence has negative effects on adjustment (Brody et al., 2006; Brody & Flor, 1988). In the face of discrimination and prejudice, minority parents typically attempt to provide their children with a cultural orientation that focuses on the uniqueness and strengths of their ethnicity (Hughes et al., 2006; Phinney, 1992; Spencer, 1987; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Much recent research (primarily conducted with African-American parents) has shown that ethnic minority parents socialize their children to prepare them for the negative or discriminatory experiences they may encounter as a result of their race. According to Boykin and Toms (1985), parental racial socialization focuses on three themes, including understanding one’s culture, getting along in mainstream society, and dealing with racism. Research indicates that moderate amounts of parental racial socialization best prepares adolescents to face discrimination.

Recent empirical scrutiny of parental motivations and reasons for granting or denying autonomy to their adolescents, however, has revealed that this process is also a matter of an awareness of the risks to adolescents due to societal prejudice and discrimination, not just a reflection of broad, cultural templates. Whereas researchers originally hypothesized that strict discipline among African-American parents indicated a collectivistic orientation, reflecting a set of hypothesized values about authority and culture, recent studies have shown that restrictions on autonomy are due to parental concerns about the environmental risks of living in dangerous neighborhoods, which make it adaptive to keep their children safe.

Some studies (Brody & Flor, 1988; Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992) have focused on lower socioeconomic status families, where the environmental risks seem obvious, but other research (Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Steinberg, 1996; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Daddis, 2004) has demonstrated that greater parental control of family
decision-making, particularly in early and middle adolescence, has protective effects for middle-class African-American families as well. It is likely that later expectations for autonomy may mitigate the psychological risks that African-American adolescents (particularly boys) encounter, due to the pervasive effects of racism and discrimination (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 2000; Brody et al., 2006; Spencer & Dupree, 1996). For instance, Boyd-Franklin and Franklin have described how everyday situations, like going to the mall, wearing certain styles of clothes, or driving in a White neighborhood, may entail risks for African-American youth. In fact, this may be a product of implicit racial bias, as demonstrated by the studies described above with young children (McGlothlin & Killen, 2006), as well as extensive studies conducted with adults (Banaji et al., 2008). To the extent that European American individuals attribute negative intentions to adolescents based solely on race, everyday behaviors may be viewed as entailing unacceptable risks by ethnic minority parents. Thus, curtailing adolescents’ freedom may help to keep them safe rather than reflecting a global value orientation such as ‘collectivism’. Indeed, Daddis and Smetana (2005) found that middle-class African-American mothers’ expectations for the desired pacing of adolescents’ autonomy predicted their adolescents’ actual autonomy two years later.

McElhaney and Allen (2001) clearly illustrated the importance of considering the context of risk. Numerous cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have demonstrated that family interactions that allow adolescents the opportunity to express independent thoughts and feelings while maintaining closeness and connection to parents facilitate better social competence. McElhaney and Allen, however, demonstrated that the context of risk moderates these effects. In low-risk families, undermining autonomy was associated with poorer-quality adolescent–parent relationships, but in high-risk families, undermining autonomy was associated with better-quality adolescent–parent relationships. Risk in this study was assessed in terms of family income and location of residence (more rural vs. urban), but research has made amply clear that for minority parents, concerns with prejudice and discrimination are part of the environment of risk, and are issues that they actively address in socializing their children.

Future Directions

The research findings to date indicate that the social environment in schools and the diversity of children’s experiences contribute to their emerging awareness of social justice, as well as to their experiences of differential treatment. Moreover, parental attitudes and beliefs play a large role in either protecting children from experiencing differential treatment based on group identity or perpetuating differential treatment through their own biases (implicit or explicit), and conventional expectations about social relationships and interactions.

Essential questions for future research include the factors that foster negative intergroup attitudes early in development, as well as the factors that facilitate positive attitudes toward the fair and just treatment of others. Parents and peers play an important role in determining whether children are provided with situations that facilitate positive attitudes or encourage negative ones. Ultimately, children construct their own perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs. Providing children with appropriate social interactional contexts and feedback about others, particularly when they are young, can help them to interpret their interactions. Providing opportunities to interact with others from different backgrounds has the potential to encourage children to enjoy diversity, learn about other cultures, and respect differences.
Although research has shown that cross-ethnic, cross-race, and cross-gender friendships are the best predictor of prejudice reduction (Tropp & Prenovost, 2008), these forms of interaction decrease during the elementary school years (Aboud et al., 2003; Bigler, Jones, & Lobliner, 1997). Children’s playgroups become increasingly homogeneous (and gender segregated), despite evidence that cross-group friendships provide opportunities for developing empathy, perspective taking, and morality. These findings lead to several pressing areas for future research.

Firstly, given the importance that cross-group/cross-ethnic friendships play in the reduction of prejudice, researchers should examine the factors that account for the decrease in these friendships in children’s lives. What factors contribute to children and adolescents viewing exclusion as legitimate or wrong, and what social–cultural factors contribute to this pattern? Clearly, parents and teachers play a role in facilitating playgroups (parents) and school groups (teachers); how their role bears on the diversity (or lack of it) of children’s interactions in childhood requires empirical scrutiny.

Secondly, research must determine how all parents (including parents from majority as well as ethnic minority backgrounds) prepare their children for the world of prejudice. Thus far, research attention has focused primarily on racial socialization among African-American parents, but it is also important to learn more about how other ethnic minority parents prepare their children to handle prejudice and racism (across cultures). More generally, researchers should investigate the messages that all parents provide around these issues, as these have not received systematic investigation (Hughes et al., 2006). The tasks for parents from these groups are different, but all parents need to be cognizant of potential discriminatory behavior from both sides of the coin. Majority parents need to focus on ways to expose their children to positive opportunities for inter-group friendships, and minority parents need to prepare children for negative inter-group attitudes.

Thirdly, group dynamics within and between groups (referred to as intra-group and inter-group, respectively) require further scrutiny. When do children prefer a peer from the out-group who espouses a norm of the in-group? How do children reconcile conflicts between group identities and group norms? These questions reflect an intersection between a developmental psychology focus on peer interactions and social psychological research on inter-group relationships (Abrams & Rutland, 2008). Integrating these models could provide new insights into the emergence of social justice in childhood. Furthermore, developmental researchers have rarely examined intra-group group biases and the implications of these interactions and attitudes for healthy peer relationships, group dynamics, and adjustment.

Fourthly, research on gender and other categories that transcend ethnic backgrounds also requires that investigators have an awareness of potential prejudice and bias. In many countries, females continue to be discouraged from pursuing careers in science, engineering, and technology, and in many places around the globe, societal norms for female independence and autonomy remain severely restricted (Nussbaum, 1999; Okin, 1989; Turiel, 2002; Wainryb & Turiel, 1994). In the USA, gender segregation is pervasive during the elementary school years (Ruble, Martin, & Berenbaum, 2006), and gender exclusion in children’s playgroups is not only encouraged but expected. In fact, gender integrated play activities are discouraged and viewed as disrupting the emergence of gender identity and appropriate behavior. Examining the rationale for gender-segregated play during the elementary school years is warranted, and it is important to investigate how children and adults contribute to these social relational and social interactional patterns.
Fifthly, exploring within-family dynamics along gender lines in different family subsystems, and particularly between parents and children, could provide new insights into the origins of social justice (Crouter, Head, Bumpus, & McHale, 2001; Nussbaum, 1999; Okin, 1989; Schuette & Killen, in press; Sinno & Killen, 2009; Turiel, 2002). Researchers should continue to examine the content of parents’ (both mothers’ and fathers’) communications to their children about social roles based on gender, and how their messages reflect their own division of labor and family care within the family. Furthermore, we need to better understand the inferences children make about these roles and their expectations for their own future roles in society. To the extent that children view parental roles as based solely on gender, they constrain children’s own future role as members of a society and culture.

Sixthly, some of the phenomena discussed here have been examined in isolation, but a fruitful area for future research is to examine links among peer inter- and intra-group relationships, school contexts, stereotyping, and social discrimination. More research on how these factors interact is needed and could contribute to the development of more integrative models. For example, what types of interactions in school contexts promote stereotyping and discrimination? How do inter-group relationships vary as a function of school composition and school climate? These are complex questions that have foundational implications for school intervention programs, which remain fairly uninformed by scientific research findings (see Solomon et al., 2000 for an exception).

Finally, future cross-cultural research could shed light on the larger issues of social justice in childhood. Categories that are relevant social justice issues in one culture (e.g., gender in the USA) take on different meaning in another culture (e.g., gender in the Middle East). Moreover, categories change in salience from one part of the world to the other, and understanding the factors that contribute to these changes could help understand the developmental questions of origins, emergence, and change. How inter-group bias manifests itself and the toll that being a recipient of negative attributions and expectations varies by culture as well. Explorations of the processes underlying these experiences and judgments across cultures will help to understand the phenomena.

Conclusions

We have asserted that how children from different backgrounds interact, make friends, and develop social competencies, as well as how parents conceptualize their parenting and act on issues of autonomy granting, need to be examined within a larger societal and cultural framework. In our view, the larger context and the ways that these diverse research avenues come together inevitably involves concerns about social justice. If we aim to create positive environments for children to grow and develop, our analyses need to move beyond a consideration of individual social skills and competencies to also consider the context in which those skills are employed. It is interesting that although there has been a shift toward considering more ecological approaches to development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), those contexts are rarely considered in terms of the normative climate of beliefs.

We propose that conceptualizations of the larger context for children’s development need to include a consideration of how negative inter-group attitudes, group identity, and exclusionary practices, change the meaning of social interactions. To successfully accomplish this, we must understand how interactions become established and the psychological mechanisms, as well as moral reasoning capacities, that enable children
and adults to inhibit negative inter-group processes, biases, and stereotypes. The different lines of research discussed in this article could contribute to the development of effective interventions to reduce prejudice, bias, and discrimination. These processes begin in childhood and are firmly established by adulthood, so early intervention is essential. The research described here has provided fairly extensive data on these processes and forms of cognition in childhood.

We have focused on only a couple of areas of research, but we believe that the issues raised here are pertinent to other research areas as well. We look forward to more research that places concerns with individual social development in the broader context of societal expectations and norms about individuals based on group membership, such as gender, race, handicapped status, sexual orientation, ethnicity, culture, and religion. This is vitally important, given that prejudice, bias, and stereotypes have a negative impact on children’s lives and bear on their healthy social development. These lines of research and intervention programs hold promise for bending the ‘arc of the moral universe’ toward justice (King, 1957/1986).

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