ADOLESCENT SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE TAKING IN CONTEXTS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE: EXAMINING PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL GROUP DIFFERENCES

by

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Abstract

The present mixed-methods study examined adolescents’ social perspective taking in contexts of social justice as demonstrated by their awareness and interpretations of hypothetical peer interactions depicting racism and sexism. Fifty adolescents in Grades 9 and 12 participated in a semi-structured interview in which they were presented with two scenarios, involving adolescents in conflicts portraying racism and sexism. They were asked a series of questions designed to elicit their awareness and understanding of social group differences. Qualitative analyses revealed three categories of adolescents’ responses, reflecting distinct interpretations of social group differences. On average, adolescents assumed a perspective that was naïve to the disparities existing between vulnerable and less vulnerable social groups. Furthermore, it was shown that older adolescents had significantly more sophisticated social justice understandings than younger adolescents. These findings highlight the need to educate adolescents about issues of social justice and facilitate an appreciation of social group differences.
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INTRODUCTION

As many modern societies in the Western world become increasingly pluralistic and heterogeneous, an important issue facing developmental researchers is how children and adolescents come to understand and communicate their social differences. Today’s youth are in an unprecedented position where they must come-of-age in a social world that integrates countless individuals with diverse social characteristics, including race/ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation, among many other distinguishing features.

Adolescence is a critical phase in the lifespan where, accompanied by significant advances in cognitive ability, individuals begin the process of identity formation (Erikson, 1968). It is during this period when adolescents acquire a unique set of beliefs and values and start to view themselves as autonomous, rational and moral agents in a larger society (Moshman, 2011). These newly formed beliefs and values subsequently shape adolescents’ interpretations of the social world and, more importantly, determine their moral conduct within it. Moreover, it is also during adolescence when social characteristics (e.g., race, sex, class) take on new personal significance as individuals undergo the task of constructing their own identity (Quintana, 1998). How adolescents respond to diversity depends upon their ability to reconcile and identify with the dissimilar beliefs and practices of those belonging to other social groups. Individuals who are able to undertake sophisticated and empathic understandings of social
differences are more likely to have more positive interactions with members of other social groups and increased overall social competency contrasted with persons who are unable or unwilling to appreciate disparities (e.g., Davis & Maitner, 2009).

A potential opportunity for gaining a better understanding of adolescents’ expanding perceptions of social difference exists in the recent wave of research examining development within contexts of social justice (see Killen and Smetana, 2010 for a review). As opposed to the notion of justice, social justice concentrates on inequality and inequity from a societal or cultural viewpoint and how fairly (or unfairly) a society treats its constituent groups (Moshman, 2008). Growing up in a diverse environment can foster tolerance in adolescence through exposure to numerous beliefs, values, traditions, and practices. Nonetheless, considerable experience with dissimilar others is also more likely to lead to increased instances of social injustice, including stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination (Killen & Smetana, 2010). Social cognitive development during adolescence strongly determines individual understandings of social diversity. Adolescents who do not have the appropriate cognitive tools to resolve their social differences are at a greater risk of disseminating thoughts and behaviours that sustain or promote inequality (Quintana & McKown, 2007).

Unsurprisingly, adolescents radically differ in their apparent commitments and dispositions towards social justice. While some routinely engage in conduct against individuals with opposing social attributes that perpetuates social inequity, others assume prosocial attitudes and faithfully dedicate themselves towards combating societal unfairness (Aboud, 2008; Brown & Bigler, 2005). Thus, the social cognitive advancements that take place in adolescence have significant implications for how one...
thinks and acts towards others from dissimilar social positions (Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005).

An essential social cognitive skill for adolescents’ understanding of social group differences is social perspective taking, which refers to the uniquely human capacity to identify, assume, and coordinate multiple and often conflicting points of view. Often described as the capacity to “step into someone else’s shoes”, social perspective taking is a critical social cognitive mechanism by which humans structure and make sense of the social world (Martin, Sokol, & Elfers, 2008). Adolescence is an important period to study social perspective taking because it is a time when our understandings and interpretations of the perspectives of others become progressively more complex, as a result of rapid progression in cognitive ability (Selman, 1980). Furthermore, social perspective taking is crucial for establishing a sense of self while building mutual understanding and sound communication in one’s relationships (Selman, 2003). It is a skill that requires a high degree of social awareness and the ability to recognize the beliefs and values of others while synchronizing them with our own (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000).

Adolescents with more mature social perspective taking ability may be more likely to possess attitudes that support social diversity as well as exhibit prosocial behaviours that uphold social justice compared to adolescents with less sophisticated perspective taking skills (Selman, 2003). For example, adolescents with the capacity to acknowledge and appreciate the social qualities that distinguish individuals from one another would also be more committed to social justice and less likely to tolerate acts of social inequity in their daily interactions. On the other hand, if adolescents have poor social perspective taking skills and lack the ability to remove themselves from their own
social positions (e.g., race, gender and social class), they are considerably more likely to internalize stereotypes, prejudices and false heuristics about those who are “different”. This can considerably affect one’s perception of one’s self as well as inhibit one’s ability to make mature moral decisions in dealings with others (Klaczynski, 2001). Additionally, poor adolescent social perspective takers are more likely to have difficulty affirming their own beliefs and values while attaining a secure and meaningful identity (Proulx & Chandler, 2009; Quintana, 2007).

The present study examined adolescent social perspective taking in contexts of social justice. In a pluralistic society, the formation and maintenance of positive intergroup interactions and relationships highly depend on adolescents’ ability to recognize and understand important social group differences. That is, adolescents must be able to appreciate the perspectives of members who belong to different social groups as well as reconcile conflicting beliefs and values. Contexts that depict social injustice threaten intergroup relations as they emphasize group differences in societal power and vulnerability. Prior to being able to grasp these critical social group differences, however, adolescents must have the necessary social perspective taking capacities. Therefore, the study assessed adolescents’ social perspective taking through their awareness and interpretations of problems of social justice. Students in earlier and later adolescence participated in an interview in which they were exposed to two hypothetical peer interactions portraying racism and sexism. Although several researchers have examined social perspective taking in adolescence (e.g., Gehlbach, 2004a; Gurucharri and Selman, 1982; Selman, 1980; 2003), to my knowledge, this is the first research to investigate adolescent social perspective taking specifically within a social justice framework.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The following is a review of the existing theoretical and empirical research that provides the necessary foundation for the study of adolescent social perspective taking in situations of social justice. I first examine the critical developmental advances that occur exclusively during adolescence in order to establish a context for the present study. Next, I delve into the relevant literature on social perspective taking, emphasizing the progression of perspective taking capacities through adolescence and their relation to the growing understanding of social difference. Finally, I review the previous social cognitive research that has implications for adolescent social perspective taking in contexts of social justice.

The Complexities of the Adolescent Social World

Adolescence signifies a critical and distinct period in the life cycle, marked by rapid cognitive growth that drastically alters how one understands, communicates and functions within the social world (see Moshman, 2011). It is during this phase where individuals begin to demonstrate advanced levels of rationality, indicated by dramatic shifts in forms of reasoning, ways of thinking, and levels of comprehension (Moshman 2005). These advances are necessary for youth to truly contemplate principles of social justice and enable persons to think about related concepts, (e.g. tolerance, respect for others, etc.) in qualitatively different ways. For example, Piaget (1952) highlighted adolescence as the backdrop for the final stage of his theory of cognitive development with the emergence of formal operations, including the capacity to engage in hypothetico-deductive reasoning, assume higher order logical thought and construe
reality from various possibilities. This ability to think abstractly is a skill that is crucial to perceptions of the self and others, as well as interpretations of social interactions and relationships (Case, 1985; 1992; Fischer, 1980; Harter & Monsour, 1992). Further contributing to growth in adolescents’ social understanding is their developing ability to engage in critical thinking (Keating & Sass, 1996), employ superior scientific reasoning (Kuhn, 1989; Zimmerman, 2000), and utilize mature thinking methods (e.g., problem solving, decision-making, argumentation, and planning) (Felton, 2004; Galotti, 2005; Jacobs & Klaczynski, 2005; Klaczynski, 2004). Finally, adolescence sees significant advances in metacognition, involving a heightened awareness of one’s own thinking and knowledge and the ability to explain one’s thoughts to others (Klaczynski, 2005; Moshman, 1998). Adolescent metacognitive development results in a surge in introspection and self-consciousness, and the emergence of a subjective or relativistic understanding of knowledge and truth, including one’s beliefs and values (Kuhn, 2000). Such progressions enable adolescents to analyze, evaluate and communicate their beliefs pertaining to social diversity in ways that are rarely seen at earlier stages of development.

Adolescent Social Perspective Taking: Origins, Theory, and Research

Contemporary research has recently drawn attention to social cognition as a potential avenue for studying adolescents’ understandings and interpretations of social justice themes (e.g. Smetana & Villalobos, 2009; Wainryb, Smetana, & Turiel, 2008). A vital component of adolescents’ understanding of social justice is their capacity to adopt and coordinate the perspectives of others with different social backgrounds (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, social class). In this section, I review the social perspective taking
literature that contributes to our knowledge of adolescents’ developing comprehensions of social diversity and provides the theoretical and empirical background for examining adolescents’ perspective taking capacities in social justice contexts.

* Origins of Social Perspective Taking as a Psychological Construct

For the majority of the past century, social perspective taking has been an important philosophical and psychological construct that is widely regarded as central to how one interprets and functions within the social world. The social interactionist George Herbert Mead (1934) saw the ability to step outside one’s self and assume others’ points of view as a uniquely human capacity, crucial to the development of both the self and social intelligence. He saw the individual person as a product of social interaction and believed that it is through comparing and evaluating different perspectives that we are able to build notions of the psychological ‘self’ and ‘other’. Early cognitive developmental notions of social perspective taking are mostly synonymous with the concept of ‘role taking’, which refers to the ability to employ the perspective of a single other individual. Piaget (1965) was among the first to empirically study the development of role taking ability in children. According to Piaget (1965), role taking is a skill that results from marked developmental shifts away from egocentrism and centration, which are requisites for concrete operational thought. Egocentrism signifies the young child’s lack of differentiation of the self from the social world, while centration refers to the incapacity to attend to multiple features of an event (Piaget, 1952; Piaget & Inhelder, 1956). Neo-Piagetian scholars, such as Feffer (1959), Chandler (1973) and Flavell (1977), have extensively studied the maturation of role taking ability and its implications for the growing child. Kohlberg (1976) saw the capacity to assume others’ role as crucial
to the development of moral reasoning, and studies have demonstrated that advanced role
taking skills are necessary for more sophisticated levels of moral judgment (Moir, 1974;

The Development of Social Perspective Taking in Adolescence: A Social Cognitive Model

Selman (1980) redefined social perspective taking as a developmental construct
broader and more complex than pure role taking. Heavily influenced by both Mead
(1934) and Piaget (1965), he saw the capacity to assume others’ points of view as
involving the ‘coordination’ of multiple perspectives. That is, social perspective taking
does not only involve imagining another person’s point of view but also entails an
awareness or understanding of how various perspectives are related to one another. Using
this definition, Selman (1980, 2003) developed a structural five-level system that charts
the development of social perspective taking from early childhood through adolescence.

Adolescence is an important period in Selman’s model where our interpretations
of perspectives become increasingly sophisticated. According to Selman (1980)’s model,
the onset of adolescence marks the transition to Level 3 social perspective taking ability,
which coincides with higher levels of cognitive development. At this stage, significant
cognitive advances enable the developing child to assume a genuinely third person
perspective during both isolated and social experiences. This conceptual advance
significantly alters how the early adolescent perceives individual persons. Where
previously children can only remove themselves from their own immediate perspective to
assume a second-person point of view, early adolescents are able to step outside the self
as a system and simultaneously observe themselves and others as reciprocating actors and
objects from a ‘generalized other’ perspective. Furthermore, in contrast with the context-
specific nature of earlier levels, adolescents can also coordinate perspectives across time and over various social contexts. This skill enables them to construct generalizations of their understanding of personalities in the form of psychological traits. Early depictions of the self and others often comprise sets of exaggerated and overgeneralized stereotypes. Consequently, personalities are perceived as being relatively stable and permanent. The ability to assume a third person perspective also shapes young adolescents’ comprehensions of social relationships. Given that they can now bear in mind multiple points of view within their interactions, genuine social bonds are believed to be acquired by coordinating balanced and mutually shared perspectives between the self and others.

Selman (1980) also asserts that a momentous shift occurs in adolescents’ understanding of the peer group with the acquisition of Level 3 perspective taking ability, which might be expected to influence their interpretations of social group differences. While children can construe only separate dyadic relationships, early adolescents develop the capacity to assume a joint perspective across a group of individuals (Selman, 1980). During this period, youth begin to perceive the peer group as a single entity consisting of persons united by homogeneous experiences, beliefs, values, and interests. However, early adolescents inaccurately attribute the strength and togetherness of the group as dependent upon the degree to which members are psychologically similar (Selman, 1980). They are subsequently compelled to defend the groups to which they belong by exaggerating both the parallels that exist among them as well as their differences from outside groups (Quintana, 1999). Adolescents also feel an important obligation to conform to group standards and preserve the impression of unanimity. Members who stand out too much and do not follow suit are a threat to group solidarity and thus risk the
scorn of the majority. Accordingly, young adolescents are often polarized into rigid cliques where assimilation and compliance to group standards are status quo. Thus, the constraints of early adolescent social perspective taking may hinder intergroup understanding and prevent perspective taking in contexts where social group differences are emphasized.

By mid to late adolescence, many adolescents have acquired the social perspective taking capacities that are representative of Level 4, the most advanced level of Selman (1980)’s model. At this point, adolescents can assume a broader third-person perspective that allows them to understand how points of view are influenced by societal and cultural roles and experiences. Adolescents are now able to recognize and take on perspectives from various conventional, societal, legal or moral viewpoints that are shared by large aggregates of people (Selman, 1980). This cognitive advance enables adolescents to analyze social differences and issues pertaining to social justice in ways that are not possible at earlier levels. With this capacity, Selman (1980) claims that conceptions of individual persons become significantly more in-depth. Adolescents come to recognize the presence of the “unconscious” within individuals, where one is capable of having actions, thoughts, intentions of which they are not consciously aware (Selman, 1980). Furthermore, adolescent notions of personality change drastically from Level 3 to Level 4. While persons in the former stage emphasize stereotypic characteristics, adolescents in the latter understand the personality as a system of conflicting and complex traits, beliefs, and values. At Level 4, adolescents also learn that perspectives are influenced by the quality of the interaction or relationships; they can distinguish
between relations that are superficial by nature and those that are deeper and take on more meaning (Elfers, Martin, & Sokol, 2006).

The transition to Level 4 perspective taking ability moreover allows for greater flexibility and sophistication in adolescents’ understanding within and between groups. Peer groups are no longer perceived as homogeneous entities at Level 4 but as pluralistic organizations, where value previously placed on conformity and assimilation are replaced by tolerance and respect for individual differences. The group is now perceived as consisting of distinct personalities brought together by collective goals and interests. Disputes and inconsistencies among group members are resolved through compromise and mutually established rules that facilitate group cohesion (Selman, 1980). The advanced comprehension of individuals and group functioning that comprise Level 4 social perspective taking are thus critical to reject and counter the processes that promote social injustice.

Given the development of general social perspective taking ability through adolescence, one may expect to observe substantial variation in adolescents’ capacity to assume others’ points of view in contexts of social justice, which emphasize important social group differences. Research suggests that individuals’ understanding and reasoning about race and ethnicity undergoes considerable growth throughout adolescence (Quintana, 1994; 1998; 2007; Quintana Castaneda-English, & Ybarra, 1999). Quintana (1994) constructed a cognitive developmental model of Mexican-American children’s and adolescents’ racial and ethnic reasoning that corresponds with Selman’s original perspective taking framework. Adolescents’ interpretations and beliefs about race and ethnicity provide potentially useful information concerning their ability to engage in
perspective taking in contexts of social justice. Tolerant and pluralistic perceptions of
diverse racial and ethnic groups are required in such contexts in order to facilitate
intergroup understanding as well as minimize the negative consequences of prejudice and
bias (Quintana, 2007). According to Quintana (1994, 1998), early adolescence marks a
fundamental shift in ethnic perspective taking with the acquisition of Level 3 perspective
taking ability. Where childhood impressions emphasize concrete characteristics of race/
etnicity (e.g. skin colour, language), early adolescents develop an awareness of the
subjective and contextual factors that distinguish groups. These influences include
background experiences related to race/ethnicity, parental attitudes, and the ethnic child-
rearing environment. Individuals also begin to exhibit an understanding of racial/ethnic
group consciousness- i.e., that there are certain perspectives, attitudes, and experiences
shared by members of a racial / ethnic group. Consequently, adolescents belonging to
ethnic minority groups begin to mutually blame the majority group for their societal
disadvantages (Quintana, 1998).

By late adolescence, most individuals develop a more multicultural perspective of
ethnicity, when they are better able to assume the points of view of ethnic groups separate
from their own. Consistent with Selman’s Level 4 social perspective taking, this capacity
accompanies an appreciation for ethnic diversity and a willingness to coordinate the
perspectives of majority and minority ethnic groups. Adolescents’ racial / ethnic
perspective taking has been confirmed to be significantly associated with general social
perspective taking ability (Quintana et al., 1999). Given the developmental sequence of
ethnic perspective taking, early adolescents may be more at risk of perpetuating beliefs
and attitudes that promote social injustice than older adolescents, which may subsequently hinder their social perspective taking ability in social justice contexts.

Throughout their research, Selman and Quintana do not report significant differences among male and female social perspective taking (Selman, 1980; 2003; Quintana, 1994; 1998). Other studies involving constructs related to adolescent social perspective taking, however, indicate a steady female advantage. For example, it has been demonstrated that adolescent females typically perform better than adolescent males on theory of mind tasks (Bosacki & Astington, 1999) and empathy measures (Mestre, Samper, Frias, & Tur, 2009). Therefore, it was unclear whether one would expect to find sex differences among adolescents’ social perspective taking in contexts of social justice.

Limitations of Selman’s Model

Selman’s model of social perspective taking has been empirically validated by several studies (e.g., Gurucharri & Selman, 1982; Selman, 1980; Selman & Byrne, 1974). Thus, it has clear implications for adolescents’ understandings of social diversity: the development of adolescents’ ability to identify and coordinate the perspectives of others facilitates more mature and tolerant interpretations of interpersonal differences. However, research has shown that more advanced social perspective taking does not necessarily lead to higher social functioning. Selman (1976) found that youth who exhibited lower levels of perspective taking were more likely to score lower on peer acceptance ratings and teachers’ evaluations of social adjustment; yet more developed perspective taking skills did not predict popularity among peers and interpersonal competency by teachers. Adolescents who differ in social perspective taking ability have also been found to have the same quality of relationships (Selman & Adalbjarnardottir, 2000).
Similarly, Selman has been criticized for miscalculating the complexity of social perspective taking (Chandler, 2001). For example, several scholars have asserted that his framework overstresses cognitive processes and does not sufficiently account for emotional and motivational factors that additionally affect social perspective-taking ability (Chandler, 2001; Davis, 1983; Gehlbach, 2004b; Staub & Eisenberg, 1981). Others have found fault with Selman for not adequately considering the role of the environment (Gehlbach, 2004b; Keller & Wood, 1989). While social perspective taking appears to advance through stage-like developmental sequences, it is arguably a skill that varies according to context. Some situations may encourage adolescent perspective taking, whereas in other contexts it is significantly more challenging to take another’s point of view (Gehlbach, 2004b). To examine the inconsistencies between social reasoning and social behavior, Selman and colleagues shifted focus towards how children and adolescents functionally and emotionally expressed their understanding of perspectives, specifically through interpersonal negotiation strategies and by attributing personal meaning (Levitt & Selman, 1996; Selman & Adalbjarnardottir, 2000; Selman, Beardslee, et al., 1986; Schultz & Selman, 1989). Despite these theoretical revisions, however, variations in adolescent social perspective taking in different contexts have largely remained unexplored.

Variability in Social Perspective Taking: The Need for Multidimensionality

Several researchers have called for a more multidimensional approach to studying social perspective taking: one that better accounts for affective, motivational and contextual demands in addition to cognition (Chandler, 2001; Gehlbach, 2004b). For example, Gehlbach (2004b) has proposed an alternative system that defines social
perspective taking as a skill that hinges on features of both the individual and environment. Factors related to the person are divided into two pathways: performance and commitment. The performance pathway refers to the cognitive resources that can potentially be employed, including one’s perspective taking ability, strategies, and cognitive style. The commitment pathway involves the individual’s motivation to engage in perspective taking as well as the ability to regulate one’s emotions. Gehlbach (2004b) claims that social perspective taking is also determined by situational factors, incorporating characteristics of the perspective-taking task and the context in which perspective taking occurs. Task-specific features include locus, decipherability, familiarity, temporality, reality, duration, and morality, while cooperativeness and distractions are unstable elements of the broader context (Gehlbach, 2004b). It is reasonable to assume that contexts that depict social injustice typically elicit differences about social characteristics that are central to adolescents’ developing identities. This may consequently alter one’s capacity to assume and understand other points of view, especially those whose beliefs and values radically differ from their own.

Recent literature in the social psychological domain highlights the potential advantages of social perspective taking in the face of racism, sexism, and other forms of social inequity (Davis & Maitner, 2010). Social psychologists have tended to employ a definition of social perspective taking akin to the construct of role taking, referring to the ability to assume the position of a single other individual (Davis, Soderlund, & Cole, 2004). Research has shown that having individuals take another’s point of view encourages the formation and maintenance of social bonds by reducing bias and facilitating intergroup understanding (see Galinsky et al., 2005). For example, perspective
taking enables individuals to rely less on stereotyped information while evaluating out-group individuals (Aberson & Haig, 2007, Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Studies have also demonstrated that perspective taking reduces reported levels of prejudicial attitudes (Dovidio et al., 2004; Galinsky & Ku, 2004; Shih, Wang, Trahan Bucher, & Stotzer, 2009; Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003).

Social perspective taking may lead to a “merging” between cognitive representations of the self and representations of the other (Davis, Conklin, Smith & Luce, 1996, Davis et al, 2004, Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Davis et al. (1996) found that adults who had engaged in perspective taking attributed a greater percentage of previously self-attributed character traits to novel targets than non-perspective takers. It was proposed that social perspective taking enabled target-related thoughts to become more connected to the self, by initiating and applying the self-concept (Davis et al, 1996). A more recent study by Davis et al. (2004) found that perspective taking caused individuals to have significantly more self-related cognitions compared to persons who did not engage perspective taking. Similarly, Galinsky & Moskowitz (2000) illustrated that perspective taking also produces greater overlap in the cognitive representations of the self and the target’s social group. For example, White college students who had assumed the perspective of an African American were more likely to ascribe self-descriptive traits towards “African Americans” in general (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Other researchers have suggested that perspective taking evokes emotional responses of empathy, sympathy towards outgroup individuals or unpleasant feelings of personal distress, which enhances social understanding (Batson, 1991; Batson, Early & Salvarani, 1997).
Collectively, these studies imply that adolescents with better perspective taking skills are less likely to proliferate cognitions and behaviours that promote social inequality. The majority of social psychological studies concerning social perspective taking, however, comprised adult participants and has not emphasized developmental changes over time. To date, no studies have directly examined adolescent social perspective taking in social justice contexts from a developmental standpoint.

Adolescent Social Cognitive Development and Understandings of Social Justice Themes

While developmental studies of social perspective taking in diverse contexts are lacking, recent burgeoning interest in adolescent social cognition offers important insight into adolescents’ developing comprehensions and beliefs pertaining to social differences and issues of social justice (Smetana & Villalobos, 2009). I will now review the relevant social cognitive developmental literature that has implications for adolescents’ perspective taking ability in situations of social inequity.

Explicit Attitudes and Implicit Biases About Race and Ethnicity in Adolescence

Highly affecting adolescents’ ability to assume the perspectives of others in situations that depict social injustice are their developing attitudes pertaining to prejudice and discrimination. Developmental research on racial and ethnic prejudice and discrimination has demonstrated that the in-group biases that typically dominate earlier childhood significantly diminish following the age of seven, so that most individuals do not exhibit explicit prejudicial attitudes towards racial and ethnic groups by early adolescence (Aboud & Amato, 2001; Aboud, 2008; Clark, Hocevar, & Dembo, 1980). Several developmental scholars have attributed this drop to progressions in cognitive
ability that occurs in middle childhood (Aboud, 1988; 2008; Devine, 1989). Devine (1989) claimed that early prejudices are activated by a new-found awareness of parental and societal appraisals of social groups, which are subsequently overcome as children become able to construct their own personal beliefs and interpretations about racial/ethnic groups. Similarly, Aboud (1988, 2008) asserted that prejudice decreases as children acquire more mature social-cognitive capacities and become more reciprocal in their social interactions, resulting in a shift in focus from the qualities of groups to individual persons. There is also ample evidence to suggest that older children’s and adolescents’ explicit intergroup attitudes are also influenced by social norms and concerns about self-presentation (Rutland, Cameron, Milne, & McGeorge, 2005). On average, adolescents have internalized that it is socially inappropriate to discriminate against others based on race and ethnicity and that ingroup biases should be suppressed (Abrams, Rutland, Cameron, & Farell, 2008). These findings indicate that many adolescents, at least externally, hold principles and values that support equality and fairness among different races and ethnicities, which may facilitate their perspective taking in contexts that depict racial/ethnic injustice.

However, there appears to be a disassociation between adolescents’ explicit racial attitudes and their implicit tendencies. While the expression of explicit biases declines in older childhood, implicit prejudices remain relatively stable into adulthood (Banaji, Baron, Dunham, & Olson, 2008). In a cross-sectional study, Baron and Banaji (2006) found that 6-year-old, 10-year-old, and adult White participants all demonstrated equal levels of implicit pro-White/anti-Black bias, despite reported explicit prejudicial attitudes decreasing with age, essentially disappearing among adult subjects. Rutland et al. (2005)
observed similar implicit intergroup biases among participants aged 6 to 16 years, and found that older children’s and adolescents’ implicit prejudices were impervious to self-presentational concerns or awareness of social norms (Rutland et al., 2005). Therefore, adolescents appear to inherit strong racial preferences from childhood but have learned to control the expression of these prejudices with age (Banaji et al., 2008). Such implicit biases may interfere with adolescents’ interpretations in social justice contexts, where a sophisticated understanding of social group differences is necessary to allow for the perspectives of all involved persons. I now turn to the existing literature on adolescent peer exclusion, where the majority of research on adolescent attitudes and interpretations of social justice has been conducted thus far.

*Understandings of Social Injustice in Contexts of Adolescent Peer Exclusion*

Among youth populations, social injustice frequently occurs in the form of social exclusion. Adolescents who base their relationships on social characteristics like gender, race and social class, facilitate the preservation of social injustice, while those who reject such grounds for friendship promote conditions of social equity (Killen & Smetana, 2010). Recent research on adolescents’ attitudes towards social exclusion offers some interesting insight into adolescents’ reasoning in situations that portray social injustice. Based on social-cognitive domain theory (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 1998), studies have demonstrated that adolescents differentiate between moral, personal and social-conventional concerns in their reasoning about exclusion and that thinking varies according to age, motivational influences and contextual demands (Killen, McGlothlin, & Henning, 2008; Killen, 2007). For example, early adolescent preoccupations with conventional and group functioning concerns can supersede concerns for justice and
fairness while reasoning about social exclusion (Killen & Stangor, 2001). Killen and Stangor (2001) had early adolescents evaluate and assess the exclusion of individuals whose interests did not correspond to stereotypical gender or racial expectations (e.g. male joining ballet club, white child playing basketball). In straightforward contexts, adolescents judged exclusion on the basis of gender and race as unjust on moral grounds and that such decisions would be unfair and discriminatory. In more complex situations, however, when asked to choose either a student who fit a stereotype and another who did not (e.g. choosing either a boy or a girl to play baseball), adolescents placed greater importance on the perceived wellbeing of the club or team (e.g., choosing a more skilled baseball player) over fairness concerns (Killen & Stangor, 2001). Gender differences were also observed as females judged exclusion as more wrong than males (Killen & Stangor, 2001).

Another study by Horn (2003) investigated 9th and 11th grade adolescents’ judgments about the exclusion of individuals from social groups based on their peer crowd membership (e.g., deciding whether a “gothic” female should be allowed to join the cheerleading team). They found that only a small majority of adolescents claimed that it is unjust to exclude someone from a group based on their peer crowd membership. Developmental and gender differences were also found as younger adolescents and males evaluated exclusion as less wrong than older adolescents and females, and were less likely to use social-conventional reasoning to justify exclusion. Findings from Killen & Stangor (2001) and Horn (2003) suggest that early adolescents’ preoccupation with conventional and group concerns may interfere with their ability to recognize and appreciate social differences in social justice contexts where social categories figure
prominently. Conversely, older and female adolescents may be better at social perspective taking under these circumstances as group concerns assume less influence on their reasoning about social exclusion.

Further studies have drawn attention to the effects of social experience on how adolescents evaluate and think about peer exclusion (Horn, 2006; Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlothlin, & Stangor, 2002; Killen, Henning, Kelly, Crystal, & Ruck, 2007). Killen et al. (2002) demonstrated that European-, African-, Latin-, and Asian American adolescents’ judgments and reasoning about gender and racial exclusion varied by context (school, friendship, peer group), type of exclusion (race and gender) and participants’ social characteristics. Although most participants judged exclusion overall as wrong, adolescents saw gender exclusion as more justifiable than racial exclusion in friendship and peer group contexts. Students also used more social-conventional reasons and stereotypic expectations to validate gender exclusion than exclusion based on race (Killen et al., 2002). Furthermore, European-American females, and ethnic minority participants (both males and females), were more likely to reject gender and racial exclusion as well as apply moral reasoning than European-American males. Horn (2006) found that adolescents belonging to high-status groups (e.g., ‘jocks’) judged exclusion as less wrong and used more conventional reasoning than adolescents who associated with low-status peers (e.g., ‘druggies”). These results suggest that adolescents who are likely to have more exposure to social exclusion (e.g., female, ethnic minority, low-status) are also more likely to tolerate social differences and, consequently uphold principles of social justice, by rejecting exclusion based on social attributes.
Adolescents who are more likely to be subjected to social injustice may also be more likely to possess the cognitive tools that facilitate intergroup relations. In Killen et al. (2002), African American participants evaluated exclusion as wrong based on empathic grounds more than students of other ethnic backgrounds. These students demonstrated the ability to step outside of the immediate interactions depicted in the scenarios to consider the detrimental effects of racial discrimination to the greater society, such as the broader societal consequences of individual exclusion and the merits of multiculturalism (Killen et al., 2002). Related research has found that ethnic minority adolescents also evaluate non-race based reasons for exclusion, including a lack of shared interests, parental discomfort, and peer pressure, less positively than majority adolescents and are more likely to anticipate racial exclusion (Killen et al., 2007). In a study involving implicit racial biases among 8th and 11th grade adolescents, Killen, Kelly, Richardson, & Jampol (2010) showed that Black adolescents were more likely than White adolescents to attribute positive intentions to the protagonist in ambiguous interracial peer encounters. Moreover, female and older students rated accusations of wrongdoing in ambiguous interactions as less fair than male and younger adolescents (Killen et al., 2010).

Finally, positive intergroup experiences may also encourage social understanding and tolerance. European-American adolescents with greater amounts of positive intergroup contact with African-American adolescents have been found to demonstrate moral reasoning about racial exclusion and were more likely to reject stereotypic expectations as grounds for exclusion (Killen, Kelly, Richardson, Crystal & Ruck, 2010). Given the aforementioned findings, adolescents with greater prior experience with social injustice, often through social exclusion, may have more sophisticated perspective-taking capacity.
than adolescents who are less likely to be exposed to social injustice or grow up in settings where social inequity is less salient.

Although older, female and ethnic minority adolescents may be better equipped to engage in social perspective taking than others, they may lack the inclination to do so in situations that highlight social group differences and elicit intergroup bias, as is typically the case in contexts of social justice. In their study of Caucasian and Mexican adolescents’ intergroup understanding, Karcher and Fischer (2004) demonstrated the effects of contextual factors on ethnic reasoning. Corroborating Quintana (1994)’s model of ethnic perspective taking, more mature understandings of cultural differences increased with age. However, it was also shown that intergroup understanding varied among adolescents as a function of their exposure to members of different ethnic groups. Furthermore, unlike Quintana (1994), Karcher and Fischer (2004) accounted for the additional influences of immediate and distal supports in the environment by measuring intergroup understanding as elicited by both probed responses (high support) and spontaneous, unstructured responses (low support). Adolescents demonstrated considerably more advanced reasoning in the high support compared to the low support conditions. This suggests that the intergroup reasoning skills that adolescents utilize in their daily interactions are below their highest capacity (Karcher & Fischer, 2004). Given these findings, adolescents’ propensity to engage in social perspective taking may be affected by contextual variables, including distal and immediate environmental supports.
Summarizing the Present Study

Research has demonstrated that social perspective taking is an essential social cognitive skill that has tremendous implications for adolescents’ interpretations of social group differences. Studies have also shown that adolescents’ reasoning about important themes of social injustice, such as prejudice, discrimination, and social exclusion, varies in relation to their social experiences. Integrating these two areas of research, the present study set out to examine how adolescents engage in social perspective taking when confronted with hypothetical interactions depicting social injustice. Situations that convey social injustice highlight the important differences that exist among members of various social groups in terms of power and vulnerability. In such contexts, social perspective taking is a prerequisite skill for individuals to recognize and appreciate these critical social group differences. While general social perspective taking ability has been shown to progress towards higher levels of sophistication over the course of adolescence (Selman, 1980; Quintana, 1994), it is unclear whether or not this development holds true in the presence of situations of social injustice. Accordingly, the primary goal of the present study was to examine adolescents’ social perspective taking as demonstrated by their awareness and interpretations of problems of social justice.

Another objective was to examine adolescent social perspective taking differences across different areas of social justice, specifically racism and sexism. Studies have shown that adolescents are particularly sensitive to issues surrounding race (Abrams et al., 2008; Rutland et al., 2005); however, they may not demonstrate the same awareness towards problems of sexism. The study focused on racism and sexism, as opposed to other areas of social injustice, because these problems are two of the most
ADOLESCENT SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE TAKING

prevalent in contemporary Canadian society (Canadian Race Relations Foundation, 2001; Cool, 2010).

A final aim of the present study was to examine variability in adolescent social perspective taking in contexts of social justice across grade and sex. Given the previous research by Selman (1980) and Quintana (1994), it was reasonable to expect that individuals in earlier adolescence would have significantly less sophisticated social perspective taking ability than later adolescents when confronted with problems of social injustice. As discussed in the literature review above, it was unclear whether sex differences would emerge, as previous studies on adolescent social perspective taking (e.g., Selman, 1980) as well as adolescents’ perceptions of themes related to social justice, (e.g., Killen et al., 2002) have yielded contradictory findings.

Research Questions

The main research questions proposed by the present study were the following:

1) (a) To what extent does adolescent social perspective taking reveal an awareness and understanding of social group differences in contexts of racism and sexism? (b) Is adolescents’ overall social perspective taking ability consistent across the social justice contexts of racism and sexism?

2) (a) Are there age/grade–related differences in adolescents’ perspective taking ability in contexts of social justice? (b) Are any observed age/grade–related differences in adolescents’ perspective taking ability consistent across the social justice contexts of racism and sexism?
3) (a) Are there sex differences in adolescents’ perspective taking ability in contexts of social justice?

(b) Are any observed sex differences in adolescents’ perspective taking ability consistent across the social justice contexts of racism and sexism?
ADOLESCENT SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE TAKING

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The sample of participants included 50 (28 male and 22 female) adolescents in Grades 9 and 12 in two moderately sized inner-city high schools. Both schools were centrally located in a large metropolitan city in the Canadian Southeast and had similar students’ family demographics and neighborhood environments. Among Grade 9 participants, there were 11 males and 10 females \((n = 21)\), while 12th grade participants consisted of 17 males and 12 females \((n = 29)\). The mean age of participants in Grade 9 was 14.79 years \((SD = 0.36)\), whereas the mean age of participants in Grade 12 was 18.19 \((SD = 0.85)\). Participants identified as belonging to a variety of racial/ethnic groups including, White (26%), South Asian (24%), Southeast Asian (18%), Black (10%), Eastern Asian (10%), Hispanic/Latin-American (6%), and Middle Eastern (6%). A significant portion of the sample (44%) had been born in a country other than Canada. Among adolescents whose families had immigrated, 68.2% \((n = 15)\) had lived in Canada for less than half of their lives and 32.8% \((n = 7)\) had spent over half their lives living in Canada. All participants reported that they were fluent in English. Participants’ diverse cultural backgrounds reflected the two schools’ student populations. As of 2008, 67% and 54% of students at each of the respective schools spoke in a primary language other than English at home. Students were predominantly from working to middle class families.

Participants were recruited through schools that agreed to partake in the study as part of a larger research project, following ethical approval by the central school board and the University of Toronto. Prior to participation, adolescents who were 18 years of
age provided informed consent, while parental consent was obtained from youth under the age of 18. Students were compensated for their contribution with volunteer hours, as part of their graduation requirements.

Design

To assess adolescents’ social perspective taking in contexts of social justice, a mixed-methods design was used (Creswell, 2009; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Mixed methods research is generally defined as employing a design in which the collection and/or analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data are incorporated into a single study (Creswell, 2009). In recent decades, mixed methods designs have gained momentum among researchers in the social sciences because they enrich findings in ways that are not possible using only one kind of data. A mixed-methods design was used primarily because combining qualitative and quantitative data expanded the breadth of our theoretical analysis. Integration of qualitative and quantitative data occurred during data analysis, as adolescents’ responses to interview questions were coded numerically and subsequently analyzed statistically.

Qualitative data collection and analysis were guided by the principles of grounded theory broadly defined (Charmaz, 2005, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Charmaz (2005) defines grounded theory as a methodological framework of “flexible analytic guidelines that enable researchers to focus their data collection and to build inductive middle-range theories through successive levels of data analysis and conceptual development (p.507)”. Contrary to the dominant quantitative methodological paradigm that emphasizes the deduction of hypotheses from existing theories, grounded
adolescent social perspective taking

Theorists do not interpret data through any pre-defined theoretical lens but create theories that are ‘grounded’ within the data itself (Charmaz, 2006). Ideas and themes from the qualitative data are constantly identified, categorized, and contrasted, and thus become increasingly abstract (Charmaz, 2006).

More specifically, the present study incorporated an approach that was loosely consistent with the constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000, 2005; 2006). Charmaz (2006) advanced a constructivist method that rejected the objectivist and positivist assumptions of classical grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss; 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). According to the constructivist perspective, grounded theories are actively constructed in relation to the previous experiences and interactions of the scientific researcher (Charmaz, 2006). Adopting a constructivist grounded theory approach provides insight into adolescents’ individual perceptions of social justice themes as well as broader developmental and structural features that may influence their interpretations. Furthermore, Charmaz (2005) argued that constructivist grounded theory methods are exceptionally compatible with studies in the field of social justice. In keeping with the constructivist approach, social justice researchers bring critical positions concerning equality, fairness, rights, and lawfulness into their studies (Charmaz, 2005).

Constructivist grounded theory strategies also encourage flexibility and comprehensiveness, which are necessary for critical inquiry into the underlying processes and conditions under which social injustice develops at both interactional and institutional levels (Charmaz, 2005).
Data collection took place in the spring of 2011 and occurred in two phases, as part of a larger study on adolescent understandings of and commitments to social justice. In the first phase, participants completed a package consisting of a demographic questionnaire and a series of standardized, paper-and-pencil assessments. Students completed the measures individually, among same-aged peers in a classroom setting. The second phase consisted of a semi-structured, one-to-one interview, administered in a quiet location at each participant’s school. Interviews were conducted by trained graduate students and were scheduled in regular intervals during school hours over a one-month period. Interviewers were matched to the gender of each of the participants. Before the interview began, adolescents were told that they would be shown three different real-life situations describing adolescent peer interactions and then asked for their opinions about them. Instructions also informed students that there were no right or wrong answers and that they could refrain from replying to any question. Furthermore, participants were assured that all responses would be anonymous and their participation would remain strictly confidential. The interviewer then read the first of three scenarios (one for each of racism, sexism, and classism) followed by the interview questions, before continuing to the second scenario. A hard copy of each scenario, printed in large Arial font, was provided to the students for their reference. The order in which scenarios were presented to participants was counter-balanced. After adolescents had responded to all three scenarios, they were debriefed about the nature of the study and thanked for their participation. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent coding and analysis. The duration of the entire interview was approximately 45 minutes.
Measures

The “Perspectives on Social Diversity Interview” consisted of three brief hypothetical scenarios depicting dyadic adolescent peer interactions within a school context. Each scenario involved two adolescents of different social characteristics (e.g., race, sex, social class) in conflict over issues that highlighted these differences. For all scenarios, there was a clear “perpetrator” and “victim” of social injustice; however, fault could be attributed to either character. In the ‘Racism’ scenario, a White adolescent makes a racist comment to a Black classmate in the context of a political discussion:

Ralph and Joe know each other well and have worked together on several projects. Ralph is Black, and Joe is White. One day before class they get into a heated discussion of a current political issue. After some sharp exchanges, Ralph says to Joe, “Of course you won’t get it- you’re White!” In angry response, Joe uses the “N” word to refer to Ralph.

In the ‘Sexism’ scenario, a male adolescent makes a sexist remark towards a female classmate pertaining to her choice of clothing:

Jane and John have been classmates throughout high school. One warm spring day, Jane comes to class dressed in a way that stretches, but does not break, the school’s dress code. John starts teasing her and comments on her body parts saying, “Hey, I’d like to see more!” In response, Jane gets upset and accuses him of being a pig.

As noted above, the interview also included a third scenario depicting an example of ‘classism’, involving two adolescents with opposing socioeconomic backgrounds; however, the present study focused solely on the two depicting racism and sexism.
Following the reading of each scenario, participants were asked a series of questions designed to elicit their understanding of the problem that had been portrayed in each interaction. Next, participants were asked to assume the perspective of each character in the scenario (e.g. “I would like you to think about the problem from John’s point of view”). Students differentiated between how the perceived characters understood the situation and how he/she felt emotionally. Furthermore, participants imagined themselves as third parties in a parallel situation (“Let’s imagine that you yourself observe this situation between two of your classmates”) and were questioned about their potential reactions (“What, if anything, would you do?”), resolutions (“What is the best solution to the situation?”), attributions of blame (“Is either person more to blame than the other?), as well as the personal significance of the scenario (“Is this situation a big deal?”). The interviewer prompted responses to clarify meaning and elicit comments that portrayed participants’ full developmental level of understanding (e.g., “What do you mean?”, “Can you tell me more about that? ”). The full interview protocol is provided in Appendix A.

Analysis

Qualitative

As discussed above, qualitative analysis of the interview data was based on constructionist grounded theory, loosely following the constant comparative techniques outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Charmaz (2006). This is an inductive analytic approach that stresses the continuous evaluation of qualitative data to comprehensively extract meaning. Throughout the analytic process, interview statements were contrasted
with other statements from the same interview as well as from different interviews to find similarities and divergences (Charmaz, 2006). Twelve participant interviews, evenly sampled across grade and sex, were selected at random for initial coding.

Coding was conducted independently by two researchers and occurred in two main phases: open and focused. Firstly, open coding involved conceptualizing each portion of the selected interviews, identifying distinct meanings and assumptions among adolescents’ responses pertaining to their awareness and interpretations of social justice and social group differences. Following this first round of coding, the researchers met to discuss, compare, and confirm recurrent themes and categories emerging from the data. These ideas subsequently provided theoretical focus for the second analytical phase, focused coding. At this level, researchers used the earlier codes as a guide to selectively combine, organize and expand upon larger segments of data (Charmaz, 2006). Focused coding facilitated the construction of increasingly differentiated categories and the integration of overarching themes within adolescents’ responses into a comprehensive analytic framework. Once the researchers agreed on a general theoretical direction, categories developed from the sampled interviews were applied to the remaining data. The researchers met regularly to compare coding for each interview and came to a consensus when there was a disagreement about scoring. Consistent with the constant comparative method, data analysis was a recursive process, wherein researchers reverted back to prior coding and modified their interpretations throughout the course of analysis. This coding strategy was used to code adolescents’ responses to the Racism and Sexism scenarios independently from one another and blind to participants’ age/grade and sex. Inter-rater reliability was calculated for each scenario using a subset of approximately
30% of the total dataset ($n = 16$). Cohen’s Kappa coefficients for racism and sexism scores were .78, and .81 respectively.

*Quantitative*

Qualitative differences in adolescents’ social perspective taking were categorized numerically and further analyzed quantitatively using traditional descriptive statistics, ANOVA, as well as univariate and correlational analyses.
RESULTS

1(a) To what extent does adolescent social perspective taking reveal an awareness and understanding of social group differences in contexts of racism and sexism?

Qualitative analyses revealed significant variability among adolescents’ social perspective taking in contexts of social justice. Three categories, reflecting qualitatively distinct interpretations of social group differences, emerged from the coding process. Adolescents with the least sophisticated interpretations assumed what may be described as an interpersonal perspective; that is, they understood the conflict in the scenario solely as a matter between two peers, and their social group differences were not a primary concern. Alternatively, participants with the most sophisticated interpretations adopted a social group perspective; they were able to reflect about the conflict in terms of the characters’ social differences and as a clear instance of social inequity. In between these extremes were the participants who demonstrated what appears to be a nominal perspective, with a combination of both interpersonal and social group features. This section will describe these categories in more detail with examples from the interviews. Categories are differentiated from one another according to five dimensions. These include (a) participants’ general interpretation of the conflict and awareness of the problems as instances of social injustice, (b) their understanding of the social differences between the two characters in the scenarios, (c) their attribution of blame for the conflict and the rationale behind their belief, (d) the perceived victim and impact of the unjust event, and the (e) personal and societal significance ascribed to the social justice problems depicted by the scenarios. Upon review of adolescents’ responses according to
these five dimensions, an overall score was assigned holistically to each of the two scenarios for every participant. Although some adolescents’ responses varied slightly in level of sophistication across the dimensions, overall consistency was strong. Levels are summarized in Table 1.

Level I: Interpersonal Perspective

Interpretation

At Level 1, adolescents were ignorant of the social justice component of the conflict and largely focused on the interpersonal relationship between the two characters. They understood the problem, not as an issue that relates to social group differences within a larger society, but as simply a conflict between two classmates who just so happened to be of a different race or sex. This type of perspective taking is illustrated in the following examples:

Interviewer: What is the problem in the scenario?

(a) Participant: Well, he’s referring … well (Ralph’s) calling (Joe) stupid because he is white. He won’t get it because he is white.

(b) Participant: I think Joe is just thinking that Ralph is trying to be better than him, so he starts using words …

Participants may have used terms that are related to “racism” or “sexism”, but these terms denoted differences as natural events rather than real problems of social justice, imposed by members of a society. For example, a common response to the Sexism vignette was to excuse the male perpetrators’ sexist comments as an innate characteristic (‘boys will be boys’), as is evident in the subsequent statements:
### Adolescent Perspectives on Problems of Social Justice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Level 1: Interpersonal</th>
<th>Level 2: Nominal</th>
<th>Level 3: Social Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Conflict between two individuals.</td>
<td>- Conflict between members of different social groups.</td>
<td>- Conflict between members of different social groups, who come from diverse social backgrounds with conflicting perspectives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Differences</th>
<th>Level 1: Interpersonal</th>
<th>Level 2: Nominal</th>
<th>Level 3: Social Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Social group differences are not recognized.</td>
<td>- Social group differences oversimplified or dismissed.</td>
<td>- Social group differences seen as central to the problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Use of politically-correct language; emphasis on equality between groups.</td>
<td>- Emphasis on equity between groups.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blame</th>
<th>Level 1: Interpersonal</th>
<th>Level 2: Nominal</th>
<th>Level 3: Social Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Blame attributed based on superficial reasons (e.g., who started conflict).</td>
<td>- Integrated social group factors in blame attributions.</td>
<td>- Blame attributions reflect considerations of societal influences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Provided interpersonal, social-conventional explanations of blame.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victim / Impact</th>
<th>Level 1: Interpersonal</th>
<th>Level 2: Nominal</th>
<th>Level 3: Social Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Victim of social injustice is not identified.</td>
<td>- Victim of social injustice is somewhat identified.</td>
<td>- Victim of social injustice is clearly identified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Impact stated in purely individualistic terms.</td>
<td>- Perceived impact is not sensitive of social group membership.</td>
<td>- Impact on individual as a member of a more vulnerable social group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significance</th>
<th>Level 1: Interpersonal</th>
<th>Level 2: Nominal</th>
<th>Level 3: Social Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Dismissive; incident perceived as inconsequential.</td>
<td>- Magnitude of conflict observed at direct, interpersonal levels.</td>
<td>- Seriousness of conflict interpreted on a broader, societal level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Less likely to have acted / interfered in conflict.</td>
<td>- May have acted / interfered in conflict.</td>
<td>- More likely to have acted/ interfered in conflict.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(a) Participant: You can’t really stop guys from looking at you or thinking of what you’re wearing and stuff. You just can’t stop them.
(b) Participant: Guys do that. You can’t stop them from saying it.
(c) Participant: I think the problem here is that they don’t understand each other, even though they are friends.

Social Differences

Level 1 responses were also largely unaware of social group differences. That is, characters’ race and sex were seen as more or less irrelevant to the problem. For example, the following Level 1 response does not recognize the importance of racial differences between adolescents in the Racism scenario:

(a) Interviewer: How do you think Joe understands what has happened?
   Participant: I think Joe is just thinking that Ralph is trying to be better than him…
   Interviewer: Better in which way?
   Participant: Better, as in like maybe smarter, maybe like socially more popular or something?

Discussing the Sexism scenario, Level 1 participants did not perceive or pay attention to characters’ differing perspectives that resulted from being members of the opposite sex, as demonstrated in the following example:

(b) Interviewer: Why does Jane become so upset from John’s comment?
   Participant: Because he’s saying that he wants to see more of her body, and she’s getting upset because that’s not nice to say. You shouldn’t really say that.
   Interviewer: Why not? What’s wrong with that?
   Participant: Because they don’t have a relationship. And he shouldn’t really say that.

Blame

Adolescents with Level 1 social perspective taking disregarded violations of social justice while attributing blame in both scenarios. Instead, these students generally
incorporated more superficial factors in their decisions. Often participants blamed the victims of social injustice (Black and female individuals) because they believed these persons had instigated an otherwise preventable conflict. In other words, the victims had done something to ‘deserve’ the discriminatory remarks that were made. In the Racism scenario, adolescents sometimes believed that the Black victim provoked the White perpetrator’s racist slur because he was first to bring up the issue of race. For example:

(a) Participant: Ralph kind of started it, because he said, “you’re white.” That kind of started the whole thing (with) the N word, so Ralph should have first thought about what he was going to say, or he could have said something else. Like “Joe, you won’t understand,” or something like that.

(b) Participant: I think it’s Ralph, because he starts calling him white. So that’s why Joe said the N word, even though … I think they are both involved in the situation, because they started discussing about this political issue, but they didn’t share their ideas very well. (But Ralph is) why they started fighting.

Additionally, by dressing in a way that stretched the dress code, participants often cited that the female in the Sexism scenario was inviting the male perpetrator’s attention from males and hence was more responsible for the conflict:

(c) Participant: If she didn’t wear that in the first place, he wouldn’t have made that remark. So, she had it coming, I guess.

(d) Participant: If I saw a girl like that, I’d think that she wants attention, because … you’re not just going to dress like that… John’s comment was inappropriate, but as much as it was, she was trying to get the attention. And I think she got the attention that she wanted.

**Victim / Impact**

Participants with Level 1 perspective taking ability were also found to be less likely to identify a clear victim of social injustice. Any evidence of vulnerability or impact of the conflict on the individuals was discussed on a purely individualistic basic,
with minimal reference to social group membership. Participants highlighted concerns that didn’t evidently involve the victim’s race or sex:

(a) Interviewer: How appropriate do you think Jane’s reaction was to the problem?
Participant: I guess she got angry because her friend was really violating her privacy.
Interviewer: What do you mean by that?
Participant: Like her body … she doesn’t want to get negative opinions on it from people.

(b) Participant: Does he say this in front of his class, or is it with her alone?... (If) she’s alone, it’s not in front of the class. But if he is doing it in front of a class or a group, everybody might start looking and it might make her feel uncomfortable.

**Significance**

Finally, Level 1 social perspective taking tended to be dismissive of the social justice themes present in the scenarios. When asked whether they believed the events of the scenarios were a major concern, participants with an interpersonal perspective generally rejected this notion. Responses often minimized the significance of the unjust act, citing the regularity of similar occurrences or their inability to relate to the situation, as shown in these examples:

*Interviewer:* Is this problem a big deal? Does it bother you?
(a) Participant: It was kind of a friendship fight. Every friendship will fight. I think Ralph tried to play a joke and it didn’t work and his friend got mad and that’s what happened.

(b) Participant: No…because this happens a lot in school, something like this, but I don’t really get offended.

(c) Participant: To me no, because I’m none of those (races).

Adolescents were also less likely to claim that they would intervene if they were present during the conflict. Several participants mentioned that they wouldn’t intervene
because it was “none of their business” or didn’t feel that the conflict warranted their involvement, as illustrated here:

Participant: I wouldn’t get involved in that…because if two dudes are [arguing], you don’t want to be the third guy. If they were trying to fight or something, I’d stop them, but if they’re just arguing…

Level II: Nominal Perspective

Interpretation

As opposed to Level 1, adolescents with Level 2 social perspective taking ability expressed a clear understanding of the centrality of characters’ social groups (race and sex) to the conflict. Nevertheless, they had difficulty explaining the relevance of social group differences to the problem. Although most participants at this level explicitly or implicitly identified the scenarios as racist and sexist, they were naïve to the broader implications of the social justice problems depicted in the scenarios. Level 2 reasoning is depicted in the following examples:

(a) Participant: They’re being racist.
Interviewer: Who?
Participant: Ralph was being racist to Joe, and Joe replied by being racist back to him.
Interviewer: Why is that a problem?
Participant: Because racism isn’t good.
Interviewer: Why?
Participant: Because it makes people feel left out.

(b) Interviewer: So why is (Jane) upset?
Participant: Because I don’t think that she feels that when she goes to school, she thought it was unfair for her to comment on what she was wearing, because she probably feels that she shouldn’t have to.
Interviewer: Why is this all a problem?
Participant: It’s a problem because John did comment on how she dressed and she got upset.
Social Differences

Level 2 social perspective taking typically involved oversimplifying or dismissing differences between social groups. Adolescents spoke in politically correct terms, emphasizing evenhandedness between the two parties. For example, while discussing the Racism scenario, participants’ responses reflected a “colour blindness” that minimized the diverging social positions of the White and Black characters. The notions that races “are all the same” and race “doesn’t matter” in contemporary society were common themes in participants’ answers. The following responses were representative of Level 2 understanding:

(a) Participant: It doesn’t matter if you’re White or Black, your head’s still the same. Your mind is still the same.

(b) Participant: If I was Joe I would think, “What does me being white have to do with what I know and what I don’t know.” I know the things I know because I was either taught it, I read it or I learned it from someone else. Me being white, Black, Indian, Chinese or whatever, doesn’t have anything to do with what you know or you don’t know.

For the Sexism scenario, participants recognized the salience of gender to the problem but generalized significant group differences between male and female characters. In the following example, the participant identified sex as a prominent factor but did not demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the relevance of social differences:

Interviewer: What is the problem here, in your own opinion?

Participant: Not sexism, but like guys being really inconsiderate of the girls’ feelings and the girl, if she knew that she was dressing inappropriate or something, then she shouldn’t have dressed like that, because she would have know that the guys would say that.

Interviewer: And why is this a problem?
Participant: Because in our society, there’s a lot of people who do that now.

**Blame**

Contrary to the previous level, participants with Level 2 perspective taking integrated social group considerations into their blame attributions. This manifested in multiple ways. First, corresponding with their concerns of equality, several participants claimed that both adolescents in the scenarios were equally at fault, despite only the perpetrator violating social justice. For example, both the victim and perpetrator in the Racism scenario were said to have made similar transgressions as both adolescents made separate references to each other’s race. This is evident in the following examples:

(a) Participant: The N word is insulting to Black people, but “of course you don’t get it you’re white” could also be assumed that he doesn’t get it because he’s white. So they’re both insulting each other.

(b) Participant: I think they are both kind of the same, because even though the N word is taken as more offensive, calling someone white or brown or Asian is the exact same thing. It goes against the stereotype.

Deliberating the scenario depicting sexism, several Level 2 students maintained that the female victim’s attire was equally as bad as the male perpetrator’s chauvinistic remarks, as illustrated here:

(c) Participant: I want to say John, but I don’t know. For every reason that you can blame him, there’s a reason to blame her...I’d say it’s both...she should know that if you are going to give yourself the appearance of being someone like that, then you’re going to … it just didn’t seem like a very smart decision by Jane. It seemed like she put herself into the position where this could happen.

Other participants with Level 2 interpretations did not attribute equal blame to both of the characters in the scenario, but found the perpetrator to be more at fault for violating
social justice. While there may be the opinion that both adolescents did something inappropriate these participants asserted that the perpetrator did something worse than the victim. For example, participants typically acknowledged that even though the Black male was first to bring up the White male’s race, it was the White male who took the argument to a new level by using a racial slur. Nevertheless, their rationale for blaming the perpetrator at this level reflected less-sophisticated understandings of racism and sexism. Adolescents who attributed more responsibility to the perpetrator typically pointed out the severity of acts of social injustice; however, they failed to show an understanding of why they were particularly unpleasant. The following example demonstrates Level 2 perspective taking in the Racism scenario:

(d) Participant: Joe is to blame more, because it is really, really offensive no matter what… Like I said before, white is just a colour. The N word is a slave word…so you have to differentiate that.

Similarly, other participants at Level 2 were not diverted by the female’s attire in the Sexism scenario and focused on the male’s bigoted remarks:

(e) Participant: Yeah, I think John is more to blame… what he said wasn’t right, and she has the right to dress however she wants. It’s not like it was outrageous, because it was still in the school uniform. He has no right to say anything about her body.

Victim / Impact

At Level 2, participants accurately identified the victim of social injustice; however, they ignored or deemphasized the implications of the racist / sexist remark to the Black / female character as a member of a vulnerable social group. As a result, the social justice violation was minimized and its impact was perceived on a lesser scale. For
example, a participant might have acknowledged that the racial slur used by the White male in the Racism scenario was a particularly derogatory term for Black people but then equivocated it to the Black male telling the White male that he wouldn’t understand the political issue because of his race. Hence, both characters were seen as ‘racist’.

**Significance**

Unlike Level 1 responses, adolescents with Level 2 social perspective taking found the conflicts depicted in the scenarios to be serious issues and were bothered by the perpetrators’ racist / sexist remarks. However, Level 2 responses reflected more immediate social concerns regarding characters’ race and sex. Participants empathized with the victim, as members of the same or similar social group, such as a visible minority or a female:

(a) Participant: Well … I think it’s a big deal… I think each one of us have the right to decide how we want to be…Of course, because I’m a woman, and I know how a woman feels about these kinds of situations… I know how she feels. I know what she’s thinking.

(b) Participant: Because it’s very insult(ing) and offensive and it’s an emotional subject... (When) people call me ‘Asian’ or … I feel very sad and angry because maybe the problem has nothing to do with my colour of skin. They blame me because my colour of skin or … yeah. It’s not fair.

Other participants at Level 2 cited explanations involving the relationship between the two characters or other interpersonal implications:

(c) Interviewer: Is this a big deal to you? Does this bother you?

Participant: Yeah, very much because they should be getting along pretty well, because they know each other well, so they shouldn’t be offending each other based on their race. They should just forget about it and not argue about the political issues.
(d) Participant: Kind of, it depends. If she hadn’t called him a pig and he kept doing it, maybe it would lead to more serious matters, like maybe him starting to touch her, or maybe her starting to give in to his commands.

Finally, participants with Level 2 social perspective taking ability were more likely to be inconsistent regarding the significance of the conflicts. An example were the adolescents who were bothered by the racist/sexist comments but at the same time acknowledge they would not have interfered had they been present in the scenario. Similarly, there were participants at Level 2 who saw themselves intervening in parallel situations, but also claimed that the conflicts were not major concerns.

Level III: Social Group Perspective

Interpretation

Adolescents who assumed a social group perspective perceived the problems in the scenarios as clear instances of social injustice. Similar to Level 2, participants with Level 3 awareness recognized that the characters’ social group differences were essential to understand and contrast their dissimilar perspectives. However, participants with a social group perspective also showed an awareness of the diverse experiences, beliefs, and values that arise from ‘belonging’ to different social groups. That is, adolescents understood that simply being Black or White/male or female strongly influenced how the characters perceived the situation. The following were examples of Level 3 interpretations of the Racism scenario:

(a) Participant: It’s a problem of racism, I think. They knew each other very well, and they cooperated before, but when it comes to political issues, it’s kind of sensitive, and race can be one of the sensitivities that each person experiences, and in the
end, I think the political issue is what caused them to retaliate and use race as an object.

Interviewer: Why is that a problem?

Participant: It’s a problem of equality and inequality. When you bring up race, you’re pretty much saying … you’re stereotyping, and stereotyping causes more problems because it makes someone feel negative emotions, and it offends people when they are being treated the same as everyone else in the race.

(b) Participant: Let’s say I’m Black and you’re white, and we’re talking. We’re very similar people. We’ve got a heart. We’ve got ten digits, two legs, two arms, brain, feelings. The same human needs, but we’re going to differ at some point. Like, as much as you’d like to think we are the same, different types of people get raised different types of ways and in different scenarios and situations, so you are never going to be exactly the same. Every race is different on its own.

Social Differences

In discussing adolescents in terms of their social differences (i.e., Black/White, male/female), participants with Level 3 perspective taking ability recognized the relevance of these differences to the conflict depicted in the scenario. Discussing the Racist scenario, several students acknowledged longstanding tensions between Whites and Blacks, often referring to the past, including mentions of Black slavery and the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Participants understood the significance of the racial slur that was used in the scenario as a reminder of oppression enforced by the White majority. The following is an example of this historical awareness:

(a) Participant: Well, he used the N word, and the N word is very offensive to Black people or African Americans because they’ve gone through a tough time in history. They’ve had slavery and they had to deal with all that… Other races have also done it, but that’s pretty much special to them. The N word…has a strong connection to that slavery, and that’s why he feels strong affliction to it.

It was also common for adolescents to refer to characters’ differing positions of relative power and privilege in society as members of different social groups. Many participants pointed out the disparity that exists between White and Blacks in terms of
opportunity and societal treatment. Hence, at Level 3, adolescents began to show early understandings of ‘equity’ as opposed to the concerns of ‘equality’ that are emphasized at Level 2. This form of reasoning is exhibited by the following examples:

(b) Participant: Joe has kind of told me that he’s better than him because of his skin colour. Because of who he looks like, he has natural rights over Ralph…it just means that because he’s white, he’s better than Joe.

(c) Participant: Because he thinks he’s different because he’s Black. He doesn’t have the same opportunities, I guess. Doesn’t think the same. He just doesn’t have the same qualities as him.

Participants with Level 3 awareness were also sensitive to society’s differential treatment of male and females, placing particular emphasis on the pervasiveness of male chauvinism and the objectification of women:

(d) Participant: The problem here, John is a pig. If he says such things and if he actually believes it…he obviously doesn’t respect women for what they are… He obviously thinks it’s okay the way he is talking… And he thinks all this is normal. This is probably how he is cool in front of his friends…

(e) Participant: Well, she doesn’t want to be treated like that. She probably believes that she’s not supposed to be used as a tool. There’s obvious attraction from men and women, but she doesn’t want to be used as a tool. She doesn’t want to be brought up as a whore, as a slut. So, yeah, she’s going to be mad. She’s going to be like, “don’t treat me like that, that’s not what I am. I’m not a slut.”

**Blame**

Participants who demonstrated the most sophisticated level of perspective taking were able look beyond the immediate scenario and examine the role of society in the conflict. At Level 3, emphasis was not given towards blaming individual characters but how the characters were influenced by societal norms, intergroup experience and other environmental factors that contribute to the ubiquity of social injustice. The following were examples of Level 3 responses to the Racism scenario:

(a) Interviewer: Is either person more to blame than the other in this situation?
Participant: Well, I think that Ralph would be partially more to blame than Joe because he is the one who said he wouldn’t understand. But, I wouldn’t blame him at all. I think I wouldn’t even blame him in the end at all, because he feels that way because of the way he was nurtured and raised and maybe because of society. And society has a deep influence on race itself, society really makes people think that Black and white is important, and in the end it’s not.

(b) Participant: It’s society that I would blame.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Participant: That’s what made us believe that white people are different than Black people.

Level 3 responses in the Sexist scenario centered on gender role expectations enforced by various societal influences, as depicted in the following example:

(c) Participant: Guys tend to hide their feelings, because it gives them this tough image that they have to keep. And for a girl to show emotions, it would be normal to them. But for a guy to show emotions would be like they’re weak. They’re sensitive. They are all these things, and for him to say that would be like he’s not showing emotion, he’s showing dominance. So, he’s saying this in order to get respect, even though in the end, it gets him nothing at all.

Victim / Impact

At Level 3, participants clearly identified the victim of social injustice. There was evidence of vulnerability or negative impact of social inequity towards the individual as a member of a particular social group, which is sometimes recognized as less powerful or more vulnerable. As opposed to participants at Level 2, adolescents with Level 3 perspective taking ability exhibited an understanding of the social hierarchies that traditionally have existed in our society:

(a) Participant: I don’t think he realizes how Ralph feels. Because he probably has never been treated how Ralph has been treated, so he doesn’t know how he is feeling and so Ralph just gets angry, I guess.

Interviewer: What do you mean?
Participant: Ralph’s Black, right? So he’s obviously been treated differently than Joe. Joe has probably never been treated like some of the stuff that he’s been treated to, so he doesn’t really understand or get it, I guess.

Significance

Adolescents with Level 3 awareness recognized the seriousness and frequency of problems of social justice on a societal level. In justifying why they believed racism or sexism were significant issues, participants cited broader social explanations, such as the betterment of humanity and the progression of society. For example:

(a) Participant: I think it’s a big deal… because there are many people who are very racist, even though we don’t see. But, I think this is very tense and strong problem (today).

(b) Participant: …I think the only way that, as a race, as people, we can get stuff done is to work together, and the fact that we’re divided up by the colour of our skin is just dumb. It’s stupid. And the fact that people are continuing it, (in) daily situations that don’t really mean that much, but it represents a lot.

(c) Interviewer: Is this a big deal to you? Does this bother you?

Participant: Yes it does because it’s unfair. You don’t see many girls sexually harass(ing) guys. It’s more explicit with girls.

Additionally, participants at Level 3 were more likely to claim that they would interfere had they been a third person in similar situations. These adolescents typically emphasized communication and perspective taking as means to a resolution, as demonstrated by the following example:

(d) Participant: I would definitely approach them, take them outside and talk to them about it and try to resolve it and make them come to an understanding…The best solution is to explain to both of them that… race is much bigger and it’s not about Black and White, it’s about humanity itself. And I think that in the end we are all human, and I would try to explain it to them in a manner, which wouldn’t offend them, try to make them come to an understanding.
Transitional Levels

Several participants’ responses consistently reflected awareness at two levels. These adolescents were assigned scores of either 1.5 or 2.5. Therefore, a total of five levels of social perspective taking were identified (i.e. 1, 1.5, 2, 2.5, 3) and used in subsequent quantitative analyses.

Adolescents’ Overall Perspectives on Problems of Social Justice

Participants’ individual scores on their responses to the Racism and Sexism scenarios were averaged to produce an inclusive overall social justice score for each participant. The mean social justice score for all participants was 1.88 (SD = .50), suggesting that many adolescents interpret peer conflicts of social justice from a largely nominal perspective with both interpersonal and social group features. Furthermore, “political correctness” about social justice issues and a preoccupation with equality as opposed to equity among social groups appears to be common themes in their overall interpretations. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of overall social justice scores.

(b) Are adolescents’ overall social perspective taking abilities consistent across the social justice contexts of racism and sexism?

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to compare overall social justice scores in the individual scenarios depicting racism and sexism. While there was no significant difference using the standard alpha level of .05, a trend approaching significance was observed; $F(1, 49) = 3.10, p = .084$. Hence, there is marginal evidence to suggest that mean interpretations of the Racism ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 0.54$) scenario were
Figure 1

*Frequency Distribution of Mean Social Justice Scores*

![Chart showing frequency distribution of mean social justice scores.]

Figure 2

*Frequency Distribution of Racism Scores*

![Chart showing frequency distribution of racism scores.]

Figure 3

*Frequency Distribution of Sexism Scores*

![Chart showing frequency distribution of sexism scores.]*
higher than mean interpretations of the Sexism (M = 1.80, SD = 0.65) scenario. Further corroborating this trend, correlational analyses revealed only a moderately positive correlation between racism and sexism scores (r = .43, p < .01). Distribution of overall racism and sexism scores are displayed in Figures 2 and 3. Correlation coefficients for mean social justice, racism, and sexism scores are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

*Correlation Coefficients for Mean Social Justice, Racism, and Sexism Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice Avg.</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>.81**</td>
<td>.87**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexism</td>
<td></td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.** = *p < .01

2(a) Are there age/grade–related differences in adolescents’ perspective taking ability in contexts of social justice?

A one-way between-subjects ANOVA was performed to compare the mean social justice scores (i.e., racism and sexism) of Grade 9 and Grade 12 participants. It was found that adolescents in Grade 12 had significantly higher mean social justice scores (M = 2.02, SD = 0.47) than Grade 9 adolescents (M = 1.69, SD = 0.50); F (1, 48) = 5.62, p = .022 (d = 0.68). This suggests that social perspective taking ability in contexts of social justice typically becomes more sophisticated over the course of adolescence.
Substantiating this finding, when correlational analyses were performed using participants’ age as a continuous variable (instead of grade), there was a significant correlation between participants’ age and mean social justice scores \( r (48) = .29, p < .05 \), as well as between age and racism scores \( r (48) = .36, p < .05 \). The correlation between age and sexism scores was not significant \( r (48) = .16, p > .05 \).

(b) *Are any observed age/grade-related differences in adolescents’ perspective taking ability consistent across the social justice contexts of racism and sexism?*

The results revealed some variation across grade/age in adolescents’ interpretations of the Racism and Sexism scenarios. Among adolescents in Grade 9, there was strong consistency in level of social perspective taking across contexts of racism \( (M = 1.71, SD = 0.56) \) and sexism \( (M = 1.67, SD = 0.60) \). In contrast, Grade 12 adolescents’ interpretation scores for the Racism \( (M = 2.14, SD = 0.46) \) and Sexism \( (M = 1.90, SD = 0.67) \) scenarios were more discrepant; \( t (28) = 1.92, p = 0.065 \). Thus, there is some evidence to suggest that Grade 12 students had more sophisticated social perspective taking ability in the Racism scenario compared to the Sexism scenario. However, a 2 x 2 mixed analysis of variance found no significant interaction between grade (9 and 12) and area of social justice (racism and sexism); \( F (1, 48) = 1.11, p > .05 \).

3(a) *Are there sex differences in adolescents’ perspective taking ability in contexts of social justice?*

A one-way between-subjects ANOVA was performed to compare the mean social justice scores (i.e. racism and sexism) of male \( (M = 1.81, SD = 0.53) \) and female \( (M = \)
1.96, \( SD = 0.47 \) participants, and no significant differences were found; \( F(1, 48) = 0.99, p > .05 \). Overall, male and female adolescents appear to perceive problems of social justice with similar levels of sophistication.

\( (b) \) Are any observed sex differences in adolescents’ perspective taking ability consistent across the social justice contexts of racism and sexism?

There was some variation across sex in adolescents’ interpretations of the Racism and Sexism scenarios. Males had significantly higher levels of social perspective taking in the context of racism (\( M = 1.96, SD = 0.52 \)) than sexism (\( M = 1.67, SD = 0.67 \)); \( t(26) = 2.84, p < .01 (d = 0.48) \). Nonetheless, for females, racism (\( M = 1.96, SD = 0.58 \)) and sexism (\( M = 1.96, SD = 0.60 \)) scores were highly consistent. Despite this discrepancy in outcome across males and females, a 2 x 2 mixed analysis of variance found no significant interaction effect between sex (male and female) and area of social justice (racism and sexism); \( F(1, 48) = 2.74, p > .05 \).

Finally, a two-way between subjects ANOVA determined that the interaction between grade (9 and 12) and sex (male and female) was not significant; \( F(1, 46) = 1.29, p > .05 \).
Main Findings

The present study examined adolescent social perspective taking in contexts of social justice as exhibited by their awareness and interpretations of hypothetical peer interactions depicting racism and sexism. Results revealed meaningful qualitative variability in how adolescents perceive problems of social justice and comprehend social group differences. Adolescents with less sophisticated interpretations employed a perspective that interpreted the situations as interpersonal conflicts between two individuals whose respective social groups were largely unrelated to the problem. These adolescents were unaware of the centrality of social group differences. Alternatively, participants with more sophisticated interpretations appreciated adolescents’ competing perspectives as a result of belonging to differing social groups with varying degrees of societal influence and vulnerability. Adolescents who adopted a social group perspective were also more likely to step outside the immediate interaction and reflect on the role of broader cultural and social factors as well as consider the effects of social injustice on our society.

The results indicated that, on average, adolescents employed a perspective with both interpersonal and social group qualities. While many participants recognized the saliency of race and sex in the two scenarios, several adolescents were also naïve about the social differences that historically have existed and remain between members of more and less vulnerable social groups. This characteristic “blindness” towards social group differences was disclosed in statements suggesting that problems of social injustice are
not as prominent in their every-day lives and that one’s social characteristics, including race and sex, have less relevancy in modern society. On the contrary, adolescents who recognized social group differences were more likely to have more sophisticated awareness of social injustice and understood the significance of these problems from a societal point of view. The political correctness evident among adolescents’ responses may be an unintended consequence of being raised in a multicultural society that stresses tolerance and diversity. In other words, by being taught that one’s race or gender shouldn’t matter in our pluralistic society, some Canadian youth may be unaware of forms of social inequity that remain prominent today. This finding is in keeping with the existing literature that has illustrated how social norms and self-presentational concerns compel adolescents to suppress and internalize in-group racial preferences and out-group biases (e.g., Abrams, et al. 2008; Baron & Banaji, 2006). However, it is also an outcome that is not adequately explained by existing developmental models of social and ethnic perspective taking (Quintana, 1994; Selman, 1980). That a substantial number of participants assumed a nominal perspective demonstrates that a concern for equality, as opposed to equity, among social groups is a primary component of adolescent social perspective taking in contexts of social justice.

Overall, adolescent interpretations of social justice were generally consistent across the two examined areas of racism and sexism. Nevertheless, the data revealed a trend showing that interpretations of the Racism scenario were somewhat more sophisticated than those regarding the Sexism scenario. This tendency may be partially accounted for by the strong emphasis placed on racial and ethnic tolerance by a diverse Canadian society. Canada is a country whose national identity is largely based on its
multiculturalism and openness towards different practices, beliefs and values. Accordingly, many adolescents growing up in Canada may not be as sensitive to issues of gender discrimination and sexual harassment as they might be towards issues involving race and ethnicity. This trend is also consistent with prior studies on adolescent gender and racial exclusion. Killen et al. (2002) found that adolescents evaluated gender exclusion as more justifiable than racial exclusion and also used more social-conventional reasons and stereotypes in their rationales for gender exclusion. However, this finding must be interpreted with discretion as overall differences between racism and sexism scores were only approaching statistical significance.

The study also examined age/grade-related differences in adolescent social perspective taking in contexts of social justice. On average, it was found that later adolescents had significantly more sophisticated social perspective taking ability than earlier adolescents. This developmental effect is consistent with age-related gains found in social and ethnic perspective taking through adolescence, as outlined by Selman (1980) and Quintana (1994). These researchers argued that significant changes occur in perceptions of social group as one progresses from earlier to later adolescence. In Selman’s (1980) social perspective taking model, adolescents typically develop from having a ‘third-person’ perspective of peer groups, marked by exaggerations of group homogeneity and internal demands for conformity and unanimity, to a perspective that views groups as pluralistic organizations, valuing tolerance and respect for individual differences. Similarly, Quintana (1994) asserted that early adolescent’ conceptions of race and ethnicity, emphasizing one’s own race/ethnicity’s collective point of view, are gradually replaced by a multicultural perspective in later adolescence that appreciates
diversity. The results of the present study suggest that development in adolescents’
interpretations of social justice coincides with advancements in social and ethnic
perspective taking. Likewise, as adolescents become more tolerant and understanding of
social group differences, they are more likely to value principles of social justice, as well
as recognize the effects of social inequity on greater society. However, age-related
differences only accounted for a small amount of the variability in adolescents’ social
perspective taking ability. This raises interesting questions concerning what other factors
may help to explain the observed variability in social perspective taking in this context.

The results also revealed a trend suggesting that Grade 12 adolescents had more
complex interpretations of racism than sexism. This finding indicates that older
adolescents may not be as sensitive to gender differences as they are to differences
between various races / ethnicities. By later adolescence, most individuals are in the final
stages in the process of identity formation, where they have acquired a unique set of
personal beliefs and values (Erikson, 1968). Previous research has shown that one’s race
and ethnicity are critical components of one’s identity, especially among minority
adolescents (e.g., Helms, 1994; Phinney, Ferguson, & Tate, 1996). It may be that, on
average, adolescents may not hold sex to same degree of importance. If sex is not as
critical to adolescents’ developing identities as is their race/ethnicity, it would help to
explain why older adolescents appear to have less sophisticated perspective taking ability
in contexts of sexism than contexts of racism.

Finally, the present study did not find significant sex differences in adolescents’
overall interpretations of social justice. Thus, it appears that males and females have
generally similar social perspective taking ability in contexts of social justice. This
finding is consistent with previous developmental literature, as neither Selman (1980) nor Quintana (1994) reported sex differences in social and ethnic perspective taking. However, the absence of sex differences is also intriguing, because females remain a vulnerable and less privileged social group in traditionally male-dominated North-American societies. Previous studies have shown that adolescents who tend to be excluded based on their social characteristics (e.g., females, ethnic minorities), are less likely to justify similar discriminatory acts and more likely to tolerate social differences than adolescents who are at less risk of being excluded because of their social groups (e.g., males, ethnic majority) (Horn, 2006; Killen, et al., 2002). Consistent with such findings, however, male adolescents demonstrated significantly more sophisticated social perspective taking ability in the Racism scenario compared to the Sexism scenario. Males, particularly those of minority status, are much more likely to be exposed to racial or ethnic discrimination than sexism. Interestingly, females, who are typically the victims of sexism and sexual harassment, appear to have similar levels of social perspective taking in contexts of both racism and sexism.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the present study. First, legitimate sampling concerns restrict the generalizability of the findings. A substantial majority of participants were from ethnic minority families. While this may have adequately portrayed the diversity of modern Canadian cities, incorporating a larger percentage of ethnic majority (White) adolescents would have been ideal. Furthermore, a sizeable portion of participants (30%) noted living in Canada for less than half of their lives, which may call into question how representative the sample was of larger Canadian society. The Racism
scenario utilized in the study also depicted a racial slur that is particularly offensive to Black adolescents, who were only a small proportion of the sample (10%). Consequently, other ethnic minority participants may have had more difficulty identifying or empathizing with the scenario. This suggests that further, more refined analyses should be conducted to examine the potential variations in response patterns across these subgroups of the sample.

In addition, participants were recruited from two diverse, inner city schools containing families from predominantly working to middle-class backgrounds, within a large metropolitan city. Social perspective taking may be substantially different among adolescents from rural, less culturally diverse locations as well as individuals from families with higher socioeconomic status. The results may also not be as applicable to adolescents outside of Canada, such as in the United States, which may have different attitudes and policies towards multiculturalism/diversity and where social injustice may be more transparent. Future studies will ideally include larger sample sizes from various geographical locations, and more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

Another limitation of the study was that it only examined two areas of social justice: racism and sexism. Of course, there are many other forms of social inequity that are prominent in Western societies and many societal groups at a disadvantage because of their social characteristics. For example, relational and institutional classism is a pervasive social justice issue in a North American culture that fosters individualism and celebrates capitalism. Other contemporary forms of societal unfairness include homophobia, ageism, religious discrimination (e.g., anti-Semitism, “Islamophobia”), and prejudice towards the physically and mentally disabled. Examining adolescents’
understandings and beliefs about these areas in future research would be beneficial. It is also important to note the difficulty in accounting for individual differences in social justice interpretations, as social inequalities will naturally vary in significance for every adolescent. Similarly, saliency of social justice concerns may diverge across different geographical locations as well as different periods of time.

There are also valid concerns regarding the study’s methodology. For instance, no measures were taken to control for participants’ intelligence and number of words spoken in the interview. This would have been helpful to ensure that scores were not related to adolescents’ expressive vocabulary or how much adolescents spoke in response to interview questions. Although all adolescents had sufficient understanding of conversational English, no formal screening of English proficiency was included and many of the participants reported speaking another language at home.

Another methodological concern regards the amount of environmental support provided in each of the interviews. Research has shown that adolescent social cognition can vary substantially according to immediate and distal supports (Karcher & Fischer, 2004). Therefore, interpretations of social justice may depend on the amount of environmental assistance provided by the interview script and the interviewer. Probed responses may have elicited more sophisticated awareness than spontaneous, unstructured responses. Since the social justice interviews followed a semi-structured format and were conducted by four individual graduate students, there may have been some variation in the consistency of probing participant responses. In their study on adolescent intergroup understanding, Karcher and Fischer (2004) found that the difference between high support and low support responses was larger for older adolescents compared to younger
adolescents. Accordingly, support discrepancies might have been particularly influential on Grade 12 participants’ social justice interpretations.

The scenarios depicting racism and sexism may have also varied in significance. For instance, the emotions evoked by the racial slur used in the Racism scenario may not have been equaled in the Sexism scenario. Perhaps interpretations of sexism would have been more sophisticated had the Sexism scenario portrayed a more blatant or aggressive example of gender discrimination. Likewise, adolescents may have responded differently had the Racism scenario illustrated a subtler example of racial bigotry. Nevertheless, the two scenarios used in the present study were carefully constructed to portray realistic and complex examples of social injustice in typical adolescent peer interactions, where fault was not easily attributable.

Educational / Clinical Implications and Future Directions

The findings of the current study have strong real-world implications. Educators and clinicians can benefit from understanding how adolescents reason about social injustice and interpret various diverse social group perspectives. Adolescence is a period of rapid social cognitive development where individual understandings of the self, one’s social relationships and the peer group become significantly more complex (Selman, 1980). Since earlier adolescents were found to have relatively unsophisticated interpretations of social inequity, school programs and interventions should be aimed towards educating these youth about issues of social justice and helping them to be aware of and appreciate social group differences. This is especially important considering that youth begin the critical process of identity formation, when their social characteristics assume new personal meaning (Erikson, 1968). Adolescents who learn to appreciate the
diverse perspectives of individuals who belong to different races, ethnicities, genders, socioeconomic classes, among many other societal groups, at such a pivotal period in their lives may be more likely to value social equity, challenge prejudice and discrimination as well as uphold principles of social justice.

The present study was unique in that it appears to be the first to examine adolescent social perspective taking in social justice contexts. Future research, however, is needed to further our understanding of adolescents’ awareness and understandings of social inequity as well as social group differences. For example, what cognitive or affective factors might further help to explain differences in adolescents’ social perspective taking in circumstances that depict social injustice? Some theorists attribute variability in social perspective taking to differences in adolescent cognitive abilities (e.g., Fischer, 1980). A competing possible theoretical stance asserts that variation might be more affective in nature. Many scholars argue that appropriate sociomoral understanding and behaviour primarily depends on the emotional response to the situation (e.g., Gibbs, 2010). It is also important to further examine how different social characteristics shape adolescents’ interpretations of social justice. For instance, does social perspective taking vary among different racial and ethnic groups? Future research may also explore adolescents’ social justice interpretations beyond hypothetical peer interactions. Social perspective taking ability may vary depending on the specific social situation (e.g., in/outside school, peer/adult interaction, etc.). Longitudinal studies would also be beneficial for tracking changes in social justice awareness throughout adolescence and into early adulthood. Such studies would make valuable contributions to a promising
new area of developmental research as well as further our comprehension about the increasingly multifaceted and pluralistic adolescent social world.
References


Social Justice Interview

1) What is the problem here? Why is that a problem?

2) Now I would like you to think about the problem from ____ ‘s point of view:
   a) How do you think ______ understands what has happened? Why would he/she think this way?
   b) How do you think ______ feels emotionally? Why does he/she feel that way?

3) Now I would like you to think about the problem from ____ ‘s point of view:
   a) How do you think ______ understands what has happened? Why would he/she think this way?
   b) How do you think ______ feels emotionally? Why does he/she feel that way?

4) Let’s imagine that you observe this situation between two of your classmates:
   a) What, if anything, would you do?
   b) What is the ideal (best) solution to the situation?
   c) Is either person more to blame (or at fault) than the other? Why?
   d) Is this a big deal (to you)?
Appendix A (continued)

Examples of Probes for Racism Scenario:

a) What does Ralph mean when he says, “Of course you won’t get it - you’re white!”? Why would Ralph say this?
b) How appropriate was Ralph’s reaction to the problem? Why? What might he have done differently?
c) Some people would say that Joe’s reaction was warranted after Ralph’s initial comment, but others would say that Joe did something much worse. What do you think?

Examples of Probes for Racism Scenario:

a) Why does Jane become upset from John’s comment? Why do you think John would say such a thing to Jane?
b) How appropriate was Jane’s reaction to the problem? Why? What might he have done differently?
c) Some people would say that John’s comments were inappropriate, while others would say that Jane was looking for attention based on her clothing. What do you think?