

Attributions of Intentions and Fairness Judgments Regarding Interracial Peer Encounters

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To investigate how adolescents interpret ambiguous actions in hypothetical interracial peer encounters, we conducted a study in which 8th- and 11th-grade students ($N = 837$) evaluated 4 interracial peer encounters in which the intentions of the protagonist were ambiguous. The sample was evenly divided by gender and included both African American and European American adolescents. European American students, male adolescents, and 8th graders were more likely to attribute negative intentions to the protagonist in interracial exchanges than were African American students, female adolescents, and 11th graders. Although all participants viewed peer and teacher accusations of wrongdoing in ambiguous situations as unfair, ethnic minority students as well as female adolescents rated accusations of wrongdoing as more unfair than did ethnic majority or male adolescents. Eleventh graders were more likely to view accusations of wrongdoing for protagonists with a prior history of transgression as fair than were 8th graders. The findings are discussed in light of efforts to reduce prejudice and to facilitate positive intergroup peer interactions.

Keywords: intergroup attitudes, fairness, prejudice, ethnicity, peer relations

Recently, much research has focused on interracial peer interactions and how contact with members of outgroups can reduce prejudice (Crystal, Killen, & Ruck, 2008; Mendoza-Denton & Page-Gould, 2008; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). Although results have indicated that intergroup contact is beneficial, there is also abundant evidence to suggest that cross-race friendships decline dramatically with age (Aboud, Mendelsohn, & Purdy, 2003). Further, although much of this research has been conducted with young adults, only recently has there been attention to cross-race relationships in childhood and adolescence.

What factors might contribute to the decline in cross-race friendships with age? Studies of implicit bias, which have used the Implicit Associations Test (Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003), have not found age-related changes; biases are present in early childhood as well as adulthood (Baron & Banaji, 2006; Rutland, Cameron, Milne, & McGeorge, 2005). Although adolescents' per-

ceptions of parental messages about cross-race relationships appear to be influential, adolescents report that these messages influence their decisions regarding cross-race dating and marriage but not cross-race friendships (Edmonds & Killen, 2009).

Recently, attention has turned to how children and adolescents interpret the intentions and motives of peers in interracial interactions and encounters (McGlothlin, Edmonds, & Killen, 2007), which might provide a window into what makes cross-race relationships infrequent. Attributions of motives and intentions have been studied extensively in the social information-processing (SIP) literature, in which it has been shown that children who overattribute hostile intentions in ambiguous peer situations do so because they misread the cues of others. This contributes to negative peer relationships and is also related to aggressive behavior as well as a host of other externalizing problems (Dodge et al., 2003; Hubbard, Dodge, Cillessen, Coie, & Schwartz, 2001). To date, no studies from the SIP model have systematically investigated whether the race of the potential transgressor in ambiguous situations is related to attributions of intentions. This is because the SIP studies use same-race scenarios (often, but not always, matching the race of the characters in the vignettes to the race of the participants). Second, the majority of the SIP studies have been conducted with low-income African American male samples. Research has focused on the factors that might contribute to patterns of hostile attribution bias in ethnic minority samples (Graham & Hudley, 1994; Graham, Taylor, & Ho, 2009). Third, the SIP research is focused on identifying individual differences and social deficits rather than general group processes that contribute to intergroup relationships (Killen, Rutland, & Jampol, 2008). Yet, examining whether the race of the potential transgressor is a variable and how attributions of intentions are revealed in samples other than low-income African American male adolescents may reveal general developmental information regarding social relationships and, specifically, cross-race relationships.

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McGlothlin and colleagues modified ambiguous peer encounter scenarios to vary the race of the protagonist (half of the picture cards had European American potential transgressors and half had African American potential transgressors) and found that young ethnic majority European American children, 6–9 years of age, attributed more positive intentions in ambiguous interracial encounters when the race of the potential perpetrator was European American (an ingroup bias) than when the potential perpetrator was African American (McGlothlin & Killen, 2006). This was the case for European American majority children attending ethnically homogeneous majority schools but not for European American majority children attending ethnically heterogeneous schools, and it was not the case for ethnic minority children attending heterogeneous schools (Margie, Killen, Sinno, & McGlothlin, 2005; McGlothlin & Killen, 2010; McGlothlin, Killen, & Edmonds, 2005).

These findings suggest that attributing negative intentions in ambiguous peer encounters may have to do with phenomena not captured by solely focusing on social deficiencies (e.g., misreading cues), given that the children in these studies were not identified as having behavior problems. Further, if the majority of European American children are attributing negative intentions to peers on the basis of race/ethnicity, then African American children who are identified as overattributing negative intentions in ambiguous situations (e.g., evidence of poor social skills) may simply be recounting their own experiences. That is, they may be the recipients of negative expectations by European American majority children, given that there is evidence that majority children use race to attribute intentions of others.

In fact, past research has shown that European American children who do not have cross-race friendships use more stereotypes to explain discomfort in interracial peer interactions than do European American children who have cross-race friendships (Killen, Kelly, Richardson, Crystall, & Ruck, 2010). Examples of the stereotypic expectations that were referenced included aggressiveness, negative emotions, and lack of shared interests; these expectations might explain why interracial interactions may be difficult. Thus, stereotypic expectations about outgroups may also be reflected in the attribution of intentions of members of outgroups, particularly in ambiguous interracial encounters, given that research has shown that stereotypes are more likely to be activated in ambiguous and complex situations than in straightforward ones (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005).

What is not known is how ambiguous interracial peer encounters are evaluated by older children, particularly in early and middle adolescence. With age, do adolescents attribute positive or negative intentions in interracial interactions when the intentions of the protagonists are not clearly defined? Further, do adolescents view it as fair or unfair for peers and teachers to make accusations of blame in ambiguous situations, and how does prior experience relate to these judgments? No research, to date, has systematically examined the age-, gender-, or ethnicity-related differences regarding adolescents' attributions of intentions for interracial peer encounters. Given that the topic of race and ethnicity remains an understudied area in peer relations research, composing only 7% of the current output of research over the past 20 years (Graham et al., 2009), research regarding evaluations of interracial peer situations is warranted. To address these concerns, we designed the present study to measure evaluations of ambiguous interracial peer en-

counters using a sample that included both European American and African American adolescents, at different ages, evenly divided by gender.

In the present study, we investigated how 14 and 16 year olds (a) attribute intentions regarding interracial interactions, (b) evaluate the fairness of peer and teacher accusations of wrongdoing in ambiguous contexts, and (c) judge the fairness of whether a target's prior history of transgression should be used by participants as relevant information for attributing intentions. Using pictures reflecting familiar, everyday contexts in which ambiguity existed in a peer encounter in a school setting (see Figure 1), we expected that with age, attributions of negative intentions would decline as individuals became less likely to explicitly use stereotypes (Killen et al., 2010), more motivated to inhibit prejudice with age (Devine, Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002), and more likely to use fairness reasoning (Horn, 2003).

We expected that African American participants, from a large sample (not identified as aggressive), would be less likely to attribute negative intentions in interracial peer encounters than

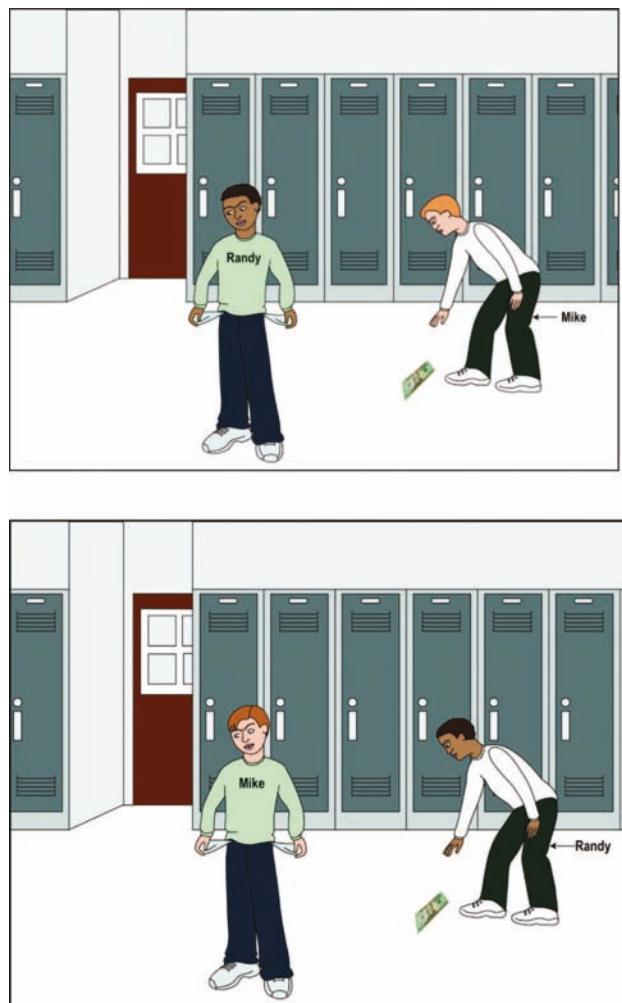


Figure 1. Picture cards used to depict ambiguous situations: stealing scenario (boy version). Figure created by Joan M. K. Tycko (Tycko Medical & Biological Art, Bethesda, Maryland) and used with permission.

would ethnic majority participants, given the stereotypes and intergroup biases held by ethnic majority participants (Killen et al., 2010; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). Moreover, we expected that female adolescents would attribute fewer negative intentions than male adolescents, given that female adolescents are more likely than male adolescents to reject racial exclusion (Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlothlin, & Stangor, 2002).

Inferring negative intentions about peers' behavior in ambiguous situations can also lead to unfair accusations, given that ambiguous encounters, by definition, do not provide enough evidence to accurately determine wrongdoing or to attribute motives and intentions (e.g., accusing a boy of pushing another child down when in fact it was an accident). Using adolescent cliques, such as "jocks" and "techies," Horn, Killen, and Stangor (1999) found that ethnic majority adolescents were willing to condone accusations of blame in ambiguous stereotypic contexts when there was a pattern of prior history of wrongdoing but that this judgment decreased with age. Thus, it was expected that with age, adolescents would be less likely to use a history of prior transgression as a legitimate basis to attribute intentions in interracial ambiguous situations on the basis of previous findings (Horn et al., 1999).

Finally, we expected that, with age, adolescents would view teacher accusations of wrongdoing in ambiguous situations negatively and that, with age, teacher accusations would be rejected by adolescents on the basis of adolescents' critical views of adult disciplinary techniques, particularly in situations involving potential prejudice (Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006).

Method

Participants

Participants were eighth- and 11th-grade students ($N = 837$) enrolled in eight public schools from the suburbs of a midsize city in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. There were 507 (290 female adolescents and 217 male adolescents) eighth-grade students ($M = 13.74$ years, $SD = .61$) and 330 (175 female adolescents and 155 male adolescents) 11th-grade students ($M = 16.27$ years, $SD = .67$). Schools ranged in ethnic diversity from 8% to 51% ethnic minority (preliminary analyses revealed that the ethnic diversity of the school was not significantly related to the dependent measures in this report).

The overall ethnic breakdown of the sample was 85% European American ($n = 714$) and 15% African American ($n = 123$), reflecting the school compositions. Of the European American participants, 439 were in eighth grade, and 275 were in 11th grade. Of the African American participants, 68 were in eighth grade, and 55 were in 11th grade. All students were from the same socioeconomic background and middle income. Although the data for languages spoken in the home were unavailable, all participants were fluent in English and were able to complete the survey.

Method of recruitment. Participants were recruited through schools that agreed to participate in the research project, following county-wide district office approval of the project. Parental consent forms were sent home, and for those children with parental consent, participant assent forms were then distributed prior to participation.

Procedure and Instruments

The Adolescent Attribution Bias Survey (Killen, McGlothlin, Henning, & O'Connor, 2005)—a modification of an interview version of the instrument used with young children, 6–9 years of age (Margie et al., 2005; McGlothlin & Killen, 2006)—was administered. Participants evaluated pictures of peer dyads in school settings (e.g., hallways, cafeterias). The pictures were displayed in color and created by a medical illustrator, who used computer software to create two versions of each scenario in which race was the only variable that differed (see Figure 1).

The four ambiguous interracial encounters reflected potential transgressions: (a) *Stealing Money* (referred to as "Steal," in which the ambiguity lies with whether the other student will steal the money or give it back), as depicted in Figure 1; (b) *Pushing Someone* in the hall (referred to as "Push," in which the ambiguity lies with whether the standing student pushed the other one down or will help him/her up); (c) *Skipping Class* (referred to as "Skip," in which it is not clear whether the student is skipping school or is legitimately leaving early); and (d) *Making a Mess* in the cafeteria (referred to as "Mess," in which it is not clear whether the student will leave the mess or clean it up). There was a "boy" version and a "girl" version; gender of the picture cards and names were matched to the gender of the participant.

All encounters were interracial. For each encounter, there were two versions, one in which the potential transgressor was dark skinned ("Black") and one in which the potential transgressor was light skinned ("White"). A between-subjects design was used (participants did not get the two race versions of the same scenario). The race of the potential transgressor and potential perpetrator were counterbalanced, with different versions of the survey distributed randomly. There were four orders, randomly distributed, which ensured that no participants received both the "Black perpetrator" and "White perpetrator" for the same scenario and that all participants received two Black perpetrator and two White perpetrator scenarios. There were no significant order effects.

After the presentation of each scenario, participants were asked to respond to seven questions, derived from the assessment with younger children (McGlothlin & Killen, 2006) and extended to include fairness questions (Killen et al., 2002). After each question, respondents circled a number on a Likert scale that corresponded to their answer (Likert anchors and numeric scale are listed below): (a) *Evaluation of the Ambiguous Action* ("What is happening in this picture and how good or bad is it?"), (b) *Fairness Evaluation of Peer Accusation* ("What if Michael [the potential victim] accuses Randy, how fair would that be?"), (c) *Fairness Evaluation of Teacher Accusation* ("What if the teacher accuses Randy, how fair would that be?"), (d) *Negative Intentions if Caught Before* ("What if Randy has been caught before, how likely is it that he has negative intentions?"), (e) *Fairness Evaluation if Caught Before* ("How fair is it to accuse Randy if he had been caught before?"), (f) *Negative Intentions if Never Caught Before* ("What if Randy has never been caught before, how likely is it that he has negative intentions?"), and (g) *Fairness Evaluation if Never Caught Before* ("How fair is it to accuse Randy if he had never been caught before?").

The Likert scales ranged from 1 to 9; the responses for all of the evaluative assessments ranged from 1 (*very, very good*) to 9 (*very, very bad*), the fairness assessments ranged from 1 (*very, very fair*)

to 9 (*very, very unfair*), and the likelihood assessments ranged from 1 (*very unlikely negative intentions*) to 9 (*very likely negative intentions*). Demographic information was recorded upon completion of the survey items.

Results

Overview of Analytic Procedures

Using repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVAs) as well as mixed factorial ANOVAs with participant race as the between-subjects factor, we found no significant results for attributions of intentions based solely on the race of the potential protagonist. Thus, the two versions of the scenarios were collapsed to allow for analyses of how participants evaluated interracial peer encounters. This was done for each assessment described above (e.g., for each assessment, the responses to the Steal scenario with a Black protagonist were collapsed with the responses to the Steal scenario with a White protagonist for a new variable referred to as "Steal"). Although there were several significant effects for scenario, there were no overall findings that bore on the major hypotheses, and thus, to streamline the report of the findings, we omitted this variable from the report.

Attributions of Intentions

To test for grade, gender, or ethnicity differences regarding the evaluations of the ambiguous actions (responses to the first question, "What happened and how bad or good is it?"), we conducted a 2 (grade) \times 2 (gender) \times 2 (European American, African American) univariate ANOVA, and it revealed a significant main effect for grade, $F(1, 802) = 7.216, p < .007, \eta^2 = .01$; gender, $F(1, 802) = 17.69, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .02$; and ethnicity, $F(1, 802) = 6.07, p < .01, \eta^2 = .01$. As predicted, eighth-grade participants ($M = 5.3$) viewed the interracial encounter as more negative than did 11th-grade participants ($M = 4.9$), male adolescents ($M = 5.4$) viewed it as more negative than did female adolescents ($M = 4.8$), and European American participants ($M = 5.3$) viewed it as more negative than did African American participants ($M = 4.9$).

5.3) viewed it as more negative than did African American participants ($M = 4.9$).

Peer and Teacher Accusations

To test whether participants judged the fairness of accusations of blame in ambiguous interracial encounters differently from peers or teachers, we conducted a 2 (grade) \times 2 (gender) \times 2 (European American, African American) \times 2 (source of accusation: peer, teacher) repeated measures ANOVA (with repeated measures on the last factor), and it revealed a significant within-subjects effect for the source of accusation, $F(1, 806) = 25.94, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .03$; a main effect for gender, $F(1, 806) = 21.68, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .03$; and a main effect for ethnicity, $F(1, 806) = 21.41, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .03$.

Participants viewed it as more unfair for a teacher ($M = 6.0$) than for a peer ($M = 5.6$) to make an accusation of blame. The main effect for gender and ethnicity indicated that female adolescents viewed both peer and teacher accusations of blame as more unfair than did male adolescents ($M_s = 6.14$ and 5.48 , respectively), and African American participants viewed it as more unfair than did European American participants ($M_s = 6.13$ and 5.48 , respectively; see Figure 2).

Prior History of Transgression as a Basis for Negative Intentions

The findings for whether the prior record of transgression by a peer in an ambiguous encounter provided a justification for an accusation of wrongdoing was tested by comparing responses of participants with the two assessments about prior history. We conducted a 2 (grade) \times 2 (gender) \times 2 (European American, African American) \times 2 (prior history: caught, not caught) repeated measures ANOVA (with repeated measures on the last factor), and it revealed a significant within-subjects effect for the prior history, $F(1, 798) = 666.87, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .45$. Participants rated the likelihood of negative intentions in the ambiguous encounter as much more likely when there was a prior history of transgression

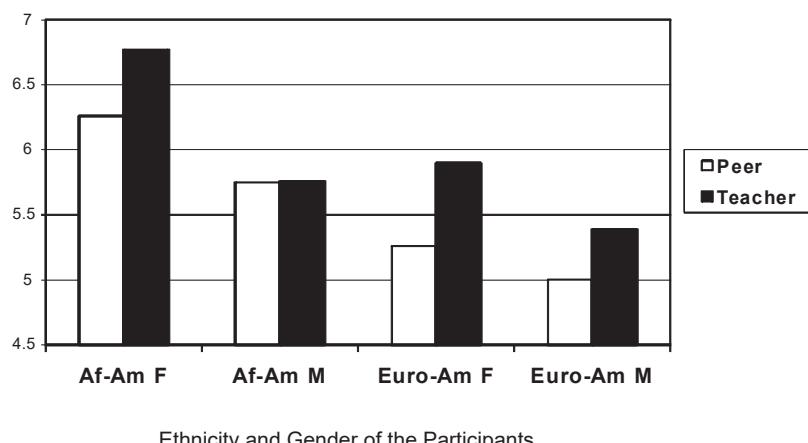


Figure 2. Unfairness of peer and teacher accusations of negative intentions as a function of the ethnicity and gender of the participants (1 = *very, very fair*; 9 = *very, very unfair*). Af-Am = African American; Euro-Am = European American; F = female; M = male.

($M = 6.62$) than if there was no prior history ($M = 3.8$), with no other differences found (see Figure 3).

Prior History of Transgression as a Basis for the Fairness of Accusation of Wrongdoing

Testing hypotheses regarding whether the prior record was related to judgments about fairness, we conducted a 2 (grade) \times 2 (gender) \times 2 (European American, African American) \times 2 (how fair if caught before, how fair if not caught before) repeated measures ANOVA (with repeated measures on the last factor), and it revealed a significant within-subjects effect for the fairness rating, $F(1, 804) = 191.08, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .19$, and a significant grade effect, $F(1, 804) = 7.04, p < .008, \eta^2 = .01$. Participants viewed it as more unfair to make an accusation when the protagonist did not have a prior history ($M = 6.09$) than when he/she did have a prior history of transgression ($M = 4.5$; see Figure 3). Irrespective of transgressor prior history, and with age, 11th graders viewed it as more fair to accuse ($M = 5.1$) than did eighth graders ($M = 5.4$).

Discussion

The novel findings of this study were that (a) African American adolescents were more likely than European American adolescents to interpret ambiguous interracial peer encounters positively, (b) positive attributions increased with age, and (c) female adolescents were more likely than male adolescents to make positive attributions in interracial peer encounters. In addition, African American adolescents, as well as female adolescents, were more likely to view accusations from a peer and a teacher, without any evidence of wrongdoing, as unfair. Yet, providing individuating information, such as a prior history of transgression, revealed age differences, such that 16 year olds were more likely than 14 year olds to view accusations of wrongdoing as fair when a prior history of transgression existed. Each finding is discussed in light of the research literature.

Attributing positive rather than negative intentions in ambiguous situations has been viewed as socially competent (Arsenio & Lemereise, 2004; Lemereise & Arsenio, 2000), particularly in terms of fostering positive social relationships. Although one might

expect such judgments to be more prevalent for female adolescents than for male adolescents because of past findings that female adolescents are more likely to view interracial exclusion as wrong than do male adolescents (Killen et al., 2002), it was not known whether this orientation would be age related or related to the ethnicity of the participants. Yet, in this study, attributing positive intentions to interracial peer encounters in a school setting was higher for African American adolescents than for European American adolescents, and it increased with age.

Social cliques and crowds peak at 14 years of age (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Further, concerns about group functioning increase as does stereotyping about groups during this age period (Horn, 2003, 2006). This may account for why the 14 year olds in this study were more likely to attribute negative intentions to interracial peer encounters that were ambiguous in intentions than were the 16 year olds. Thus, regarding attributions of intentions, 16 year olds were more positive than were 14 year olds. These age-related findings could reflect a number of developmental changes that need to be examined in future research.

Given that the peer encounters were interracial, the diversity of participants' social experiences could play a role. For example, increased intergroup contact diminishes the negative associations with members of outgroups, for both majority and minority participants (Tropp & Prenovost, 2008), and this pattern, along with increased moral reasoning (Helwig, 2006; Smetana, 2006), could have played a role in why 16 year olds were less likely to expect that the target had negative intentions than did 14 year olds. In addition, self-presentational bias increases with age, and although little of this work has been conducted in adolescence, the awareness of how one responds to racially oriented stimuli could be a factor (Rutland et al., 2005). Alternatively, the results could be explained by an increased motivation to withhold prejudicial judgments that set in during adulthood (Devine, 1989).

What other factors may account for negative attributions regarding interracial peer encounters? For European American adolescents, these interactions could be less familiar than for African American adolescents who, as numeric minority members in the United States, regularly interact with European Americans. These negative attributions may also reflect a form of indirect racial bias, previously documented for young children and for adults but not

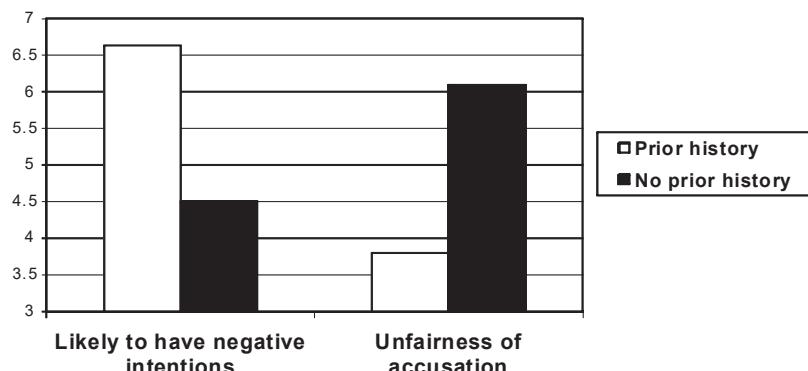


Figure 3. Likelihood of negative intentions and fairness of accusations as a function of prior history of transgression by the protagonist (Likelihood: 1 = *very, very unlikely*; 9 = *very, very likely*; Fairness: 1 = *very, very fair*; 9 = *very, very unfair*).

yet for adolescent samples, which contributes to the more negative evaluations of interracial encounters by ethnic majority European American participants than by ethnic minority participants (Baron & Banaji, 2006; Killen, McGlothlin, & Henning, 2008; Rutland et al., 2005). Viewing an interracial peer encounter may trigger a negative racial bias unbeknownst to the participant. In a study by Peets, Hodges, Kikas, and Salmivalli (2007), children attributed more negative intentions to "enemies" than to "friends," suggesting that negative affect may be more readily associated with interracial peer encounters by majority European American participants (Peets et al., 2007). Negative attributions by European American adolescents regarding interracial encounters could contribute, in part, to the decline in cross-race friendships from early childhood to adolescence. These interpretations remain speculative and require further investigation.

Surprisingly, adolescents did not use the race of the potential transgressor to attribute negative intentions, as has been shown in prior research (which used the same paradigm) with children 6–9 years of age (McGlothlin & Killen, 2006). Prior studies have shown that by adolescence, excluding peers from group settings because of their race is evaluated as wrong (Killen et al., 2002), and this was reflected in adolescents' attributions of intentions, even when the assessment was indirect and not explicitly identified as pertaining to race or ethnicity. The measures in this study were not strictly implicit, however. Participants were consciously evaluating a peer encounter, unlike implicit measures that record responses that are automatic and uncontrolled (and do not find age differences; Banaji, Baron, Dunham, & Olson, 2008; Rutland et al., 2005).

Even though there was no obvious indication that the assessments were about race, given that participants did not evaluate two versions of the same scenario (e.g., Black perpetrator, White perpetrator), being asked to evaluate interracial peer encounters may have triggered an awareness that the measure was about racial bias, and thus, self-presentational bias could have played a role in participants' responses. Further, Devine et al.'s (2002) findings regarding the motivation to inhibit prejudice may have contributed to older adolescents' view that accusations in interracial encounters should be modified. Moral judgments also played a role, as evidenced by the findings for the fairness of accusations of wrongdoing.

The findings for fairness judgments from ethnic minority adolescents revealed social competencies not typically reported in the literature, which too often focus on a deficit model (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). A unique contribution of the present study, then, was to demonstrate how ethnic minority adolescents apply moral judgments, such as fairness, to the context of interracial peer exchanges, particularly when the intentions of the protagonists are ambiguous. In a study by Greene et al. (2006), ethnic minority adolescents perceived discriminatory attitudes from adults and authority figures. In the present study, both ethnic minority and majority students were included as participants, and although both groups viewed teacher accusations regarding wrongdoing in interracial encounters as wrong, ethnic minority students did so to a greater extent than did ethnic majority students. Ethnic minority students have reported greater discrimination from authority figures than have ethnic majority students (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000), and this could have contributed to their view that teacher accusations in ambiguous situations are unfair.

In prior studies about excluding a peer from a social situation on the basis of race, the vast majority of all children and adolescents have judged this type of behavior as wrong and unfair. Very few ethnicity-, gender-, or age-related findings for fairness judgments, however, have been reported. Instead, findings have been documented for gender such that female adolescents view racial exclusion as more wrong than do male adolescents (Killen et al., 2002), and even this finding has been qualified, however, because gender differences have emerged for ethnic majority samples (Killen et al., 2002) more often than for ethnic minority ones (Killen & Stangor, 2001). In this study, though, it was shown for the first time that evaluations of the fairness of accusations regarding interracial peer encounters increased as a function of age of the participants and that female adolescents and ethnic minority participants were more likely to view accusations as unfair.

The vast majority of all adolescents were found to view prior history of transgression as a legitimate basis to attribute negative intentions. Using a person's prior history as a basis to accuse someone of wrongdoing, however, would not be condoned or allowed in a legal court, and these findings indicate that adolescents not only took this information into account but allowed it to influence their fairness judgments. Other findings have shown that adolescents rely on stereotypic assumptions to condone accusations of wrongdoing (Horn et al., 1999), and the findings in the present study indicate that prior history of transgression was a strong basis for making attributions of intentions by adolescents. The extent to which this assumption of wrongdoing contributes to interracial tension or a decline in interracial friendships remains to be investigated.

Systematically testing evaluations of interracial peer encounters provided a new way to extend the hostile attribution paradigm, developed by SIP researchers (Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000), by testing for group differences, such as ethnicity, age, and gender of the participants. Although the ambiguous situation used in the present study differed in some ways to the standard SIP paradigm, the findings provide a call to carefully consider the role of race in SIP assessments, both in terms of the ethnicity of the participant as well as the race/ethnicity of the pictures in the stimulus materials. The identification of the race/ethnicity in a peer encounter could play a role in how the findings are interpreted regarding levels of social competence. In research with adults on attributions of intentions, studies have shown that ethnic minority adults attribute more negative intentions when receiving feedback about their performance from a European American coworker than do European American adults (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991), again, indicating that the role of race regarding interracial interactions has to be closely examined and may reveal positive or negative intention attributions depending on the context.

An important follow-up to this study would be to compare children's and adolescents' evaluations of same-race and cross-race interactions within one study. Constraints in the administration of 16 versions of the scenario (four stories with two race-of-the-protagonist versions and two sets that varied by gender) for the present study did not allow for the inclusion of same-race scenarios. It would be valuable in the future, however, to include the racial composition of the interactions (both same-race and cross-race) as a variable for future investigation to determine what types of judgments are unique to the interracial context.

In addition, it would be beneficial in future research to obtain data on the factors that contribute to evaluations of ambiguous actions by peers. We conducted analyses on school composition, and these variables were not significantly related to the dependent measures obtained in this study. Future research on intergroup contact (Tropp & Prenovost, 2008) and other potential family factors could be measured to understand the bases for attributions of motives and intentions in ambiguous interracial peer encounters (Mendoza-Denton & Page-Gould, 2008). Additionally, further probing about why the transgressor acted in the manner that he or she did could allow us to understand the participants' perception of the motivation behind the action itself. In the present study, attributions of intentions pertained to the intentions of the transgressor. In future research, analyses could be conducted on attributions of racial bias by the potential transgressor, recipient, or observer in a peer encounter.

The fact that there were age, gender, and ethnicity of the participant findings for evaluations of interracial interactions suggests that including more varied contexts for peer encounters could be valuable. For example, measuring evaluations of same-race and cross-race encounters in school and out of school could be fruitful and would contribute to an understanding about attributions of intentions and motives in peer encounters involving race. A follow-up study should also be conducted to cross gender as well as race in the scenarios, given that all participants evaluated same-gender scenarios.

There are many implications of these findings for understanding the emergence of racial attitudes in childhood and adolescence. Interracial interactions, particularly in early adolescence, may be vulnerable to miscommunication and anxiety, given that young majority adolescents view it as legitimate, at times, to accuse someone of wrongdoing on the basis of minimal evidence (and more so than young minority adolescents). Steele, Spencer, and Aronson (2002) have argued that the study of prejudice has to focus on the subtleties of interactions between ethnic majority and minority groups and that social identity threat often stems from the miscommunications and implicit messages about performance that may be unbeknownst to the messenger. Developmental science reveals how these miscommunications emerge in childhood and adolescents, which includes, in this study, attributions of intentions and fairness of accusations in ambiguous situations.

Extensive research has indicated that cross-race friendships are the best predictor of prejudice reduction (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). One explanation for the decline in cross-race friendships that occurs with age (McGlothlin et al., 2007) may have to do with the different attributions applied to interracial encounters, particularly when motives and intentions are unclear. Thus, interventions that focus on revealing hidden assumptions and clarifying interpretations of intentions may go a long way toward facilitating positive interracial exchanges, which ultimately have the power to reduce prejudice (Gaertner et al., 2008).

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