

**Developmental Perspectives on Social Inequalities and Human Rights**

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**Abstract**

Social inequalities and human rights are inevitably linked to children's and adolescents' healthy development. Children who experience structural and interpersonal inequalities in access to resources and opportunities based on their gender, race, ethnicity, or other group categories are denied the right to fair treatment. We assert that investigating the *psychological perspectives* that children hold regarding inequalities and human rights is necessary for creating fair and just societies. We take a constructivist approach to this topic which seeks to understand how individuals interpret and evaluate observed and experienced inequalities. Even young children think about these issues. Yet, throughout development, individuals must often weigh multiple, potentially conflicting considerations when interpreting, evaluating, and responding to social inequalities and rights violations. In these complex contexts, children and adolescents are neither fully "moral" nor fully "prejudiced." Rather, critical questions for research in this area concern when, why, and for whom young people reject inequalities and support rights, and, by contrast, when, why, and for whom they accept that inequalities and rights violations should be allowed to persist. This paper provides a brief overview of how different conceptions of social inequalities and rights are intrinsically linked together.

Key words: Social Inequalities, Human Rights, Constructivism, Moral Reasoning, Development

### Developmental Perspectives on Social Inequalities and Human Rights

Young people who experience restricted access to resources and opportunities based on group memberships such as gender, ethnicity, religion, or social class are denied the right to fair and equal treatment. Experiencing inequalities and a denial of human rights results in a host of negative outcomes for individuals and societies. For example, children and adolescents experiencing discrimination are at increased risk for depression, social withdrawal, and anxiety (Fisher et al., 2000; Neblett & Carter, 2012; Neblett et al., 2008; Russell et al., 2010; Yip, 2014), school disengagement, reduced motivation, and drops in achievement (Alfaro et al., 2006; Benner & Graham, 2007; Chavous et al., 2008; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Walton & Cohen, 2011), and a range of negative physiological and biological effects on sleep, disease risk, and brain development (Boyce et al., 2010; Liberzon et al., 2015; Yip, 2015). At the societal level, countries with high inequalities in which the rights to nurturance and well-being are denied to segments of society have shorter life expectancies, higher mortality rates, higher crime rates, lower social cohesion and trust, and higher rates of depression (Powell-Jackson & Hanson, 2012; van der Wel & van Steenbergen, 2018; Wilkinson & Picket, 2009; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017).

The goal of this review is to demonstrate how different conceptions of social inequalities and rights are intrinsically linked together and emerge early in development. Despite a general expectation that children are unaware of complex concepts such as social inequalities and rights, research has demonstrated that children think about these issues in relation to their everyday social interactions and experiences. We propose that these early emerging concepts have implications for their attitudes and perspectives both early in development and when they become adults. This includes decision-making about issues such as resource distributions, fair

and just treatment of others, and understanding how unfair treatment can turn into a violation of others' rights. For this paper, we focus mostly on inequalities based on race, ethnicity, gender, and social class, while recognizing that there are many other important identities that warrant consideration (e.g., sexual orientation, nationality, immigrant status, religion, [dis]ability).

We take a constructivist approach to this topic which seeks to understand how individuals interpret and evaluate observed and experienced inequalities (Elenbaas, 2019a; Killen & Smetana, 2015; Nucci & Turiel, 2009; Piaget, 1932; Ruck et al., 2014; Turiel, 1983). A constructivist approach also takes an active view of the child, recognizing that not only do children adopt and comply with societal norms and expectations but they can also be critical, rejecting and challenging adult and societal messages (Killen & Dahl, 2021; Smetana et al., 2014). Historically, one of Piaget's (1932) many insights was that children's morality is not a result of straightforward compliance with adult rules and mandates. He demonstrated how, with increasing age, children recognized that rules are constructed by individuals and groups, and that morality is distinct from group rules due to the intrinsic consequences of unfair acts to others (Piaget, 1932). Contemporary research has documented the multiple ways in which children challenge and reject societally condoned traditions, customs, and conventions that they perceive to be unfair (Elenbaas et al., 2020; Ruck et al., 2017). Research from social domain theory (Smetana et al., 2014), social reasoning developmental (SRD) models (Elenbaas et al., 2020; Rutland & Killen, 2015) and developmental perspectives on human rights (Karras et al., 2022; Ruck et al., 2014) has guided a body of knowledge from a constructivist approach on this topic. These child-centered approaches examine how children and adolescents interpret and evaluate experiences in their everyday world.

While children have early conceptions of social equality and inequality as well as rights that should be afforded to children and adults, there is a fair amount of heterogeneity regarding the emergence and application of these concepts. This heterogeneity takes several forms. First, there are many different types of social inequalities (e.g., racial inequality, gender inequality) and rights (e.g., protection, provision, participation) which show varied trajectories. Second, relative to early studies of moral judgment more than 50 years ago (Piaget, 1932; Kohlberg, 1969), increasing sample diversity in contemporary work has generated new knowledge about how children's experiences as members of multiple social groups inform their views on inequality and rights (Killen et al., 2021; Turiel et al., 2016). Third, judgments about inequalities and rights can depend on the target of differential treatment (e.g., ingroup vs. outgroup).

Thus, a constructivist perspective is both contextual and universal. The context of children's experiences, including their own group status, access to opportunities, and experiences with social exclusion have to be taken into account when understanding their judgments about inequalities and rights. At the same time, a universal approach focuses on those principles that children hold and generalize to others in terms of one's obligations and prescriptive norms about rights and fair treatment (e.g., everyone has the right to be protected from harm).

In this article, we review theories, research, and findings on how children and adolescents perceive, conceptualize, and judge issues of social inequalities and rights. We first discuss the framing and definitions of the central constructs and theoretical approaches guiding this research. Then we discuss how studying psychological perspectives about social inequalities and rights is related to supporting social and moral development. Next, we provide examples of research on social inequalities, including children's and adolescents' perceptions of the distribution of wealth, access to resources and opportunities, and awareness of social mobility and social status

hierarchies. We then review research on children's and youth's perceptions about rights, and specifically protection (nurturance), provision (access to resources), and participation (autonomy and freedoms). We discuss how these constructs are linked and what makes this approach novel. Finally, we discuss implications of the findings and future directions.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Investigating children's and adolescents' conceptions of social inequalities and rights from a constructivist framework requires analyzing their judgments, reasoning, and decision-making. Social domain theory has demonstrated that individuals use multiple forms of reasoning when evaluating social events which include moral concerns (fairness, equality, others' welfare, and rights) along with societal considerations (customs, conventions, and traditions), and psychological judgments (concerns for autonomy and personal choice; see Smetana et al., 2014; Turiel, 2015). Social reasoning developmental theory has documented how these forms of reasoning and other categories are applied to intergroup contexts in which considerations of group identity, group norms, and group functioning are present. In many cases, moral reasons include the wrongfulness of discrimination and bias, social justifications include preserving group identity, and psychological attitudes involve attributions of intentions of others based on race, ethnicity, gender, and other group categories (Elenbaas & Killen, 2016; Rutland & Killen, 2015). Finally, human rights theories (Karras et al., 2022; Ruck et al., 2017) have examined how individuals evaluate rights related to protection (nurturance), provision (access to resources primarily with respect to nurturance) and participation (agency and autonomy). These theories have provided a basis for the research described in this review.

### **Social Inequalities and Rights**

We are concerned with the developmental understanding of social inequalities, and specifically inequalities that are intricately tied to human rights. Egalitarian and non-hierarchical social relationships are distinct from nonegalitarian relationships such as those that are found in educational, political, and workforce settings where, for example, entry-level positions are at the bottom and provosts, presidents, and CEOs, respectively, are at the top of the hierarchy. In these latter contexts, the imbalance of power is theorized to lie with the experience, knowledge, skill, and expertise required to move up the ladder. Theoretically, these qualifications provide the blueprint for a productively functioning group within an institutional or social context. As has been demonstrated throughout human history, however, other factors unrelated to individual qualifications contribute to social mobility. For example, groups that enjoy high status often resort to exclusionary and discriminatory practices based on group identity to maintain the status quo (Anderson, 1999; Sen, 2009). These factors result in unfair and inequitable conditions for those who are not at the top of the social hierarchy (Anderson, 1999; Fourie et al., 2015; Miller, 1995; Sen, 2009).

Another aspect of social inequality refers to access to resources and opportunities which is often denied to individuals based on their group identity and social status. Those in a position to restrict access to resources and opportunities often justify the decision based on a lack of merit, deservingness, or experience, such as when someone does not work for an opportunity, or does not qualify for access due to a set of predetermined qualifications (Anderson, 1999). As with social relationships, the criteria for access to resources is often exclusionary such that only certain groups have opportunities (Sen, 2009).

We draw on moral philosophy, political science, and doctrines generated by societal organizations for our definition of human rights. Human rights are “ethical claims constitutively

linked with the importance of human freedom,” (Sen, 2009, p. 366), which serve to motivate many different activities from legislation to the implementation of appropriate laws to prevent rights violations (Sen, 2009). To protect human rights, it is essential to rectify social inequalities that result in rights violations including the lack of protection from harm, the denial of provisions for well-being, and the denial of autonomy and participation by individuals within their community and society (Ruck et al., 2017). The issue of children’s rights has been a fairly recent focus for developmental science despite attention from social and political action for the past century. Support for children’s rights is best exemplified by the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; U.N. General Assembly, 1989). The two central sections of the CRC are nurturance (survival, and protection rights) and self-determination (participation rights; Helwig & McNeil, 2011; UNICEF, 2009).

### **Children’s Psychological Perspectives about Social Inequalities and Rights**

We assert that investigating the *psychological perspectives* that children hold regarding inequalities and human rights is necessary for creating more positive societal conditions that support rectifying social inequalities and human rights violations (Elenbaas et al., 2020; Killen & Dahl, 2021; Ruck et al., 2019). This is a different but complementary approach from investigating how best to design, implement, or evaluate policies to address problems that result when children and adolescents experience inequality and a denial of human rights (Duncan et al., 2010). While policy approaches are essential for creating societal level solutions to foster positive conditions for child and human development, we assert that understanding psychological perspectives are necessary for changing attitudes that perpetuate inequalities. As an example, when individuals perceive social inequalities as stemming from solely individual deficiencies, creating societal-level solutions becomes much more difficult as the source of the problem is attributed to individual and not to societal and structural sources.

Our argument for the connection between developing perspectives on inequalities and the perpetuation of societal-level inequalities rests on three sets of findings. First, attitudes and judgments about social inequalities and human rights directly affect children's well-being, their developing identity, sense of self, and relationships with other people, including peers and adults. Research has shown that what children think about social groups and human rights influences how they think about themselves (e.g., Is my group privileged or marginalized? Do I have a chance for upward mobility? Will I be protected from harm and unfair treatment?) and other people (e.g., Who deserves access to opportunities and resources? Should I distance myself from a stigmatized group? Who is afforded protections from harm or access to provisions?). Children not only experience the negative outcomes of social inequalities, but their experiences of disparities also contribute to how they conceive of these aspects of society, which has direct implications for their family and peer lives. We review research demonstrating that these issues are very real for children in their everyday lives beginning at a young age. Being aware of these issues can include being confused, inconsistent, and conflicted because these notions are emerging and developing from early childhood to adulthood.

Second, a significant body of research has shown that stereotypes and prejudice stemming from inequalities, assumptions about who counts when affording basic rights, and beliefs about whether rights are mandatory, maintain systemic racism, sexism, and other forms of inequality (Durante & Fiske, 2017; Kay & Jost, 2003; Ruck et al., 2019). These routes for maintaining inequality are especially prevalent in contexts where ambivalent or system-justifying stereotypes can be applied (e.g., "poor but happy"), contexts with achievement consequences (e.g., academic, professional), and contexts involving competition for limited resources (e.g., outgroup threat; Durante & Fiske, 2017; Kay & Jost, 2003). For instance, children make stereotypic assumptions about social class groups (e.g., poor peers are sad, rich peers are smart)

that influence their decisions about peer social inclusion and exclusion (Ahl & Dunham, 2019; Burkholder, Sims, & Killen, 2021; Elenbaas et al., 2016; Olson et al., 2011; Ruck et al., 2019; Rutland & Killen, 2015; Shutts et al., 2016). In fact, children's and adolescents' group identities have significant implications for when and why they apply concepts of equality, equity, and rights in their social relationships. Peer relationships reflect social hierarchies and group dynamics that, in turn, often result in negative social experiences including social exclusion (Killen & Rutland, 2011; Rutland & Killen, 2015). Thus, interactions, relationships, and group dynamics that reflect status markers contribute to the cycle of prejudice and bias (Chafel & Neitzel, 2005; Olson et al., 2011; Shutts et al., 2016).

Third, despite the early emergence of stereotypes and prejudice, children and adolescents hold moral concerns for fairness and others' welfare that support their efforts at changing the status quo. As one example, children in countries with rigid status hierarchies are well aware of cultural messages condoning social segregation, but are also critical of parental messages that prohibit friendships between peers from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Nepal: Grütter et al., 2021). These findings are related to research which has shown that children and adolescents who have opportunities to assert their rights and engage in social responsibility benefit by having their voices heard and taken seriously (Karras et al., 2022; Ruck et al., 1998). Thus, understanding children's and adolescents' psychological perspectives on social inequalities and human rights provides information about the developmental origins of attitudes that inhibit or promote healthy development, as well as serve as the basis for policy initiatives and changes at the societal level.

### **Individual and Structural Sources of Social Inequalities**

Explanations based on individual sources of inequality are often used to reject the proposition that societal barriers and obstacles such as discrimination exist which thwart upward mobility even when individual effort is high. In contrast, explanations based on structural sources of inequality such as social exclusion and biases can provide a means for proposing policies designed to rectify inequalities.

Attributing inequality to individual sources (not structural sources) can have negative implications for individuals who make an effort but are confronted with societal obstacles outside of their control. For example, Arsenio and Willems (2017) report that low-income ethnic minority U.S. adolescents who view inequalities as a result of individual rather than structural sources are at increased risk for depression and social withdrawal when confronted with a lack of access to resources and opportunities. Current research on critical social analysis of inequality among marginalized youth can help to offset the negative messages they often receive (Diemer et al., 2021). Burkholder, Elenbaas, & Killen, (2021) asked U.S. children and adolescents from middle income backgrounds representing White, Black, Asian, and Latinx racial/ethnic groups about the source of wealth for individuals who were high or low SES. Most participants viewed structural explanations (few opportunities and little inheritance) to account for why low SES had little wealth (Burkholder, Elenbaas, & Killen, 2021). Interestingly, participants viewed both structural explanations (access to opportunities and high inheritance) and individual explanations to explain high wealth acquisition (access to opportunities, inheritance, high effort and high intelligence). These attitudes are important to study because they contribute to the formation of judgments and decision-making that have consequences for individuals' well-being, health, and social equality.

Children who grow up believing that inequalities are solely a matter of individual effort without a recognition for the structural factors that perpetuate inequalities are less likely to

endorse positions that help to rectify inequalities from an institutional viewpoint. Children initially view human rights as applying to everyone (Canada: Ruck et al., 1998; South Africa: Willenberg et al., 2014). The developmental trajectory reflects a process of an increase towards considering multiple perspectives which can result in both an intolerance for human rights violations and a priority of groups based on status hierarchies. This contradiction requires close examination. In addition, research with adults has shown that overestimating social mobility and underestimating wealth inequality is a product not just of informational errors but also biased social cognition (Kraus & Tan, 2015). Kraus and Tan (2015) propose that motivations to see the self and society positively, which includes the notion that working hard will have its rewards, contributes to overestimation of social mobility even when societal obstacles exist.

### **Early Origins: How Children Perceive and Evaluate Social Inequalities**

In their everyday lives, children encounter many inequalities across social groups such as gender, race, and social class. As a part of understanding the societies that they live in, children actively think about these inequalities, seeking to explain why things are structured the way they are and forming judgments about the consequences (Elenbaas et al., 2020). Recent research has revealed that children think about social relationships in terms of social power (Charafeddine et al., 2021; Gülgöz & Gelman, 2017) and status hierarchies (Yee et al., 2022). Thinking about power and status, however, does not convey whether children think these relationships are legitimate or unfair.

When children view intergroup inequalities as unfair, they often take steps to rectify them. For instance, children may reallocate resources between peers, include previously excluded peers in an opportunity, or advocate for changes to authority figures' (e.g., teachers') inequitable policies. Yet, under certain conditions, children create and reinforce inequalities by

withholding resources or opportunities based on group membership, excluding peers based on stereotypes, or simply remaining silent when faced with discriminatory policies.

Why does children's reasoning and decision-making often appear contradictory?

Research shows that, when it comes to inequalities between groups in society, children are simultaneously concerned with moral issues such as fairness, justice, and rights, and social group issues such as benefitting their ingroup, relating to groups considered higher status, and interpreting stereotypes about group membership and what people "deserve" (Elenbaas et al., 2020). As a result, children must weigh and balance multiple factors when evaluating resource inequalities and social groups, and when deciding when to support and perpetuate or critique and resist social inequalities as they encounter them in peer, family, school, and neighborhood contexts.

### **Evaluating Resource Inequalities**

Distributive justice refers to the principles used to allocate resources and opportunities among people, including (but not limited to) principles of equality, merit, and equity. Reasoning about distributive justice is essential to understanding social inequalities. For instance, becoming aware of social inequalities involves recognizing that resources and opportunities are not equally distributed. Similarly, assumptions about merit often underlie stereotypes about the causes of social inequalities, and recognition of equity is a necessary step towards rectifying inequalities.

Developmentally, young children often value distributive equality when sharing toys and treats among peers (Elenbaas & Killen, 2016; Fehr et al., 2008; Rizzo et al., 2018). Older children increasingly reason about merit and equity, distributing more resources to peers who work harder (e.g., color more pictures) or exhibit greater need (e.g., have fewer snacks; Elenbaas, 2019b; Rizzo et al., 2018; Schmidt et al., 2016). Later in childhood, children begin to

distinguish between the resources that people need, such as food, and the resources that people want, such as candy (Essler & Paulus, 2021; Mistry & Elenbaas, 2021; Rizzo et al., 2016); early adolescents are increasingly attuned to narratives about distributive fairness in broader society. For example, in one recent study, middle income U.S. youth believed that economic systems offered everyone a fair chance at upward mobility, and the more they endorsed these meritocratic beliefs the less likely they were to prioritize equity when deciding which peers should receive a special opportunity (Elenbaas & Mistry, 2021; see also Godfrey et al., 2019; Kornbluh et al., 2019). Thus, children's beliefs about what constitutes distributive fairness gain context-specificity across childhood and into adolescence.

### **Evaluating Social Groups**

Social inequalities involve unjust distributions of resources and opportunities based on *group membership*. For example, in the United States, many social inequalities involve race and social class. Children's thinking about these (and other) group memberships is influenced by the social hierarchies present in their social contexts. For instance, young children from upper middle class U.S. families prefer to play with and befriend rich peers over poor peers, but young children from lower middle class families show more mixed social class group preferences (Elenbaas, 2019b; Shutts et al., 2016). Similarly, young White children prefer to affiliate with White peers over Black peers, while young Black children show more mixed or equal racial group preferences (Mistry et al., 2021; Renno & Shutts, 2015). Thus, ingroup biases are powerful, but developing attitudes about social class and race are also influenced by beliefs about status and meritocracy to which U.S. children are exposed (Mistry et al., 2021). In fact, reflecting broader cultural stereotypes, older children from middle class backgrounds hold ambivalent stereotypes about both rich peers (e.g., intelligent and motivated, but snobby) and

poor peers (e.g., not responsible, but kind and generous; Ahl & Dunham, 2019; Burkholder et al., 2020; Elenbaas & Killen, 2019; Shutts et al., 2016). Thus, children's beliefs about social groups often imply that social inequalities are the result of group differences in intelligence, motivation, or responsibility (also see Hussak & Cimpian, 2015).

Studying children's conceptions of these issues necessitates considering the intersection of various identity groups that have been the focus for research. Much research on children's understanding of social inequalities and rights has focused on one group at a time, such as gender, race, or ethnicity (Ghavami et al., 2016). Yet, recent research has focused on multiple groups given that individuals are members of multiple groups simultaneously, and particularly when individuals are members of more than one stigmatized group (Ghavami et al., 2016; Ghavami & Mistry, 2019; Lei et al., 2020). For example, research has investigated children's evaluations of social exclusion based on multiple group memberships, determining the priority children give to factors such as race or wealth when including a new member into a group (Burkholder, Elenbaas, & Killen, 2021). Children consider multiple group identities at the same time, and attitudes about intersectional social categories are distinct from attitudes about any single group.

### **Supporting and Perpetuating Social Inequalities**

Children's decisions to withhold resources or opportunities, exclude or harass peers based on stereotypes, or simply remain silent when witnessing discrimination serve to reinforce social inequalities in interpersonal contexts. For example, children are more likely to judge intergroup inequalities as acceptable when their social groups benefit from the disparity. Relative to children from less affluent families, children from more affluent families find it more normal and acceptable to exclude a peer from a group activity because of their social class (Burkholder et al., 2020; Elenbaas & Killen, 2019). Similarly, girls evaluate exclusion based on gender as more

wrong than boys do (Park & Killen, 2010), and children of color evaluate exclusion based on race as more wrong than White children do (Cooley et al., 2019). In other words, when resources or opportunities are limited, ingroup preferences among children who are members of more privileged groups can result in actions that reinforce those social hierarchies (see also McGuire et al., 2019; Rizzo & Killen, 2020).

Even when children do not stand to personally gain from maintaining an inequality, seeing other ingroup members benefit can be enough for children to allow it to persist. For example, in one recent study, Black and White 5- to 6-year-old children growing up in a racially diverse area of the United States rectified a resource inequality where their racial ingroup members had fewer resources but not an inequality where racial outgroup members had fewer resources (Elenbaas et al., 2016). That is, children whose ingroup was disadvantaged by an inequality took steps to address it while children whose ingroup benefitted from the disparity were more noncommittal in their behavior, allowing the disparity to persist. Thus, when children perceive their social group to be higher in status than other groups, they are more likely to overlook—or even reinforce—intergroup resource inequalities.

### **Critiquing and Resisting Social Inequalities**

Despite facing challenges, however, children *often* take steps to resist, challenge, or rectify intergroup inequalities that are within their sphere of influence. In fact, as they take on more roles in social, educational, and economic systems, older children and early adolescents often develop explicit awareness of unequal social structures and greater social-cognitive capacity to take a critical stance. For instance, in the United States, older children of multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds begin to perceive that people of color are more likely to face discrimination than White people and recognize that there is a racial wealth gap that favors

White people in broader society (Bañales et al., 2019; Elenbaas & Killen, 2016, 2017). Older children of multiple social class backgrounds also begin to perceive that rich peers have more opportunities than poor peers do, and that factor outside of a person's control, such as their access to education, can influence someone's social class standing (Arsenio & Willems, 2017; Elenbaas & Killen, 2019; Elenbaas & Mistry, 2021).

Yet, awareness alone is rarely enough. Only children and adolescents who are aware of social inequalities *and* consider them unfair are especially likely to rectify similar inequalities that are within their sphere of influence. For instance, in one recent study, older Black and White children who perceived a racial wealth gap in society *and* reasoned about others' rights were likely to correct an experimental inequality where Black peers had been denied access to familiar resources needed for health and well-being (Elenbaas & Killen, 2016). Similarly, middle-income early adolescents who perceive economic disparities in access to education in broader society *and* reason about them as harmful are likely to correct an experimental inequality where poor peers were excluded from learning opportunities (Elenbaas, 2019a; Elenbaas & Mistry, 2021). Thus, when older children and early adolescents hold more critical beliefs about the fairness of economic systems, they often take the opportunity to act more equitably when determining who should have access to resources and opportunities (also see Diemer et al., 2021).

### **Conceptions of Rights: Protection, Provision, and Participation**

Concern with the issue of children's rights in developmental science is recent in historical terms but has been the focus of a great deal of social and political action over the last century (Diemer et al., 2021). Increased awareness of children's human rights is reflected in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC; U.N. General Assembly, 1989). The CRC has been ratified by all the countries of the world, with the exception of the United States. It recognizes

children as individuals worthy of citizenship and serves to increase the commitment of nations worldwide to children's political, social, economic, and cultural rights. Hence, young people are regarded as active agents and holders of rights. Understanding social inequalities necessitates a recognition about rights, such as those that have been identified through societal documents such as the Bill of Rights (U.S.) and the Convention on Rights of the Child (U.N. General Assembly, 1989; Ruck et al., 2014).

Despite variation in what types of rights children are entitled to, three broad areas include the rights to protection, provision, and participation (Ruck et al., 2017; Troope, 1996). Protection or nurturance rights pertain to the obligations of others (e.g., parents) to provide for and safeguard children's psychological, emotional, or physical well-being. Provision includes entitlements to resources such as food, shelter, and education, and children's autonomy (participation; Ruck et al., 2017). In contrast, children's participation or self-determination rights refer to the types of personal issues and freedoms that give children some measure of control over their lives. Protection and participation have emerged as distinct, and at times contradictory constructs in dealing with children's rights.

Understanding that the infliction of harm on another violates expectations for the fair and just treatment undergirds attitudes about social inequalities. Documenting the developmental trajectory of these perceptions and judgments in childhood, then, has implications for adult decision-making about inequalities and rights. In particular, helping children to understand the complexity of addressing inequalities has the potential to foster more complex problem solving by adulthood.

Both protection and participation are considered essential for establishing children's psychological health and well-being (Cherney, 2011; Earls & Carlson, 2002; Helwig & McNeil,

2011; Ruck et al., 2014). The CRC attempts to achieve a workable balance between protection and participation (Ruck & Horn, 2008). This balance is reflected in two fundamental tenets of the CRC: the “best interests of the child” and the “evolving capacities of the child.” In extending rights to children, society must not only deal with determining the appropriate balance between protection and participation but whether children actually have the capacity to use their rights in a self-protective manner

If children’s rights are to protect children from harm and safeguard and promote their development and well-being, it is essential to examine how children themselves think about their own rights (Peterson-Badali & Ruck, 2011). Work on this topic has examined attitudes, endorsement, and reasoning about children’s rights. When examining attitudes, a number of studies have shown variability. For instance, with respect to endorsement or support for rights, adults and children show stronger support for children’s protection rights compared to children’s self-determination rights (Peterson-Badali & Ruck, 2008). In addition, support for children’s participation right is also influenced by the age of the target child to which participants are asked to respond. Both children and adults show strong endorsement for protection rights regardless of the age of the child under consideration, but participation rights are more likely to be supported for older children and adolescents than for younger children.

This line of research on reasoning about children’s rights has built on the social domain approach mentioned above that has examined the development of conceptions of personal rights and civil liberties (Peterson-Badali et al., 2019; Ruck et al., 1998). Social domain theory suggests that children construct multiple forms of social reasoning based on distinct types of social experiences (Smetana et al., 2014). Developing thinking about children’s rights is nuanced and depends on multiple factors including the particular aspects of the situation under consideration.

Interestingly, there is mixed evidence when looking at gender differences in term of attitudes or support for children's rights. The extant literature based on adult and university student samples suggests that, for nurturance rights, women are more supportive of children's nurturance right than men, but there are no gender differences in support for children's participation rights (Peterson-Badali et al., 2019). In terms of gender differences in children's own attitudes, some studies have shown that girls show greater support for protection rights than boys do (Peterson-Badali et al., 2019), while other studies showed little evidence of gender differences in children's support for either type of right (Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2006; Ruck et al., 2002).

Consistent with social domain theory, studies have found that how children and adolescents reason about children's rights depends on both the type of right (protection vs. participation) under consideration as well as the context or situation in which the right is embedded (Elisha & Ruck, 2012; Ruck et al., 1998). For example, young people's reasoning about protection rights is more likely to focus on the roles and duties of the various parties or individuals involved (e.g., parents and children) while reasoning about participation rights is more likely to focus on individual rights-related concepts such as personal freedom. As Ruck et al. (2014) note, similar patterns of reasoning have been found in work examining conceptions of protection and participation rights in rural and urban Chinese adolescents (see Lahat et al., 2009).

Surprisingly, few studies have compared children's and parents' reasoning about children's protection and participation rights. Parents are often the "gatekeepers" to children's rights as they tend to be in positions to either fulfill or restrict children's rights (Cherney et al., 2008; Helwig, 1997; Ruck et al., 2017). The available research in this area has found that, compared to adolescents, mothers' reasoning was more likely to consider the age or maturity of

the target child, particularly with regard to participation rights (Ruck et al., 2002). Interestingly, mothers also recognized the balance between children's right to participation and their right to be cared for and protected. Balancing children's protection and participation rights is essential to both parenting (Baumrind, 1978) and establishing healthy developmental outcomes for children (Ochaita & Espinosa, 1997).

### **British Children's Views of the Human Rights of Asylum-Seeker Youth**

There has also been research examining how children and adolescents think about the protection and participation rights of individuals who are members of their social "outgroups," such as refugees or asylum-seekers. In the United Kingdom, there has been and continues to be political and public concern about asylum-seekers and refugees who have been historically viewed as posing a threat to British culture (Aznar et al., 2018; Lynn & Lea, 2003). Refugees and asylum-seeking youth are named in the CRC among the groups of children whose rights and well-being require special protection (Ruck et al., 2014), yet more recently the U.K. government's Nationality and Borders Bill appears to renege on protections for asylum-seekers and migrants (McDonnell, 2021).

In addition, many asylum-seekers engage in religious practices that some members of the host country may view as "foreign" (Lynch & Cunningham, 2000; Verkuyten & Slooter, 2007), with negative implications for asylum-seekers' religious rights and freedoms (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2012). Religious rights and freedoms may include either protection or participation rights (Ruck & Tenenbaum, 2014). For example, wearing a head scarf (hijab) implicates an individual's religious participation rights while requiring food to be prepared according to set religious guidelines implicates religious protection rights.

As one example, Tenenbaum and Ruck (2012) examined whether ethnic-majority British youth viewed the religious rights of asylum-seeker youth as worthy of protection. When evaluating hypothetical vignettes, British youth were more likely to support the religious rights (e.g., the right to practice the religion of one's choice) of asylum-seekers than non-religious rights (e.g., the right to parental emotional support). A more fine-grained analysis of participants' reasoning indicated that, consistent with social domain theory, British youth employed patterns of reasoning that varied depending on the type of right under consideration (protection vs. participation) and whether religious or secular rights were implicated. For example, when deciding whether or not to support the asylum-seeker's religious self-determination rights (e.g., the right to wear a head scarf), participants often used moral reasoning by making references to fairness and equality and the importance of respecting religious beliefs. However, when considering non-religious or secular participation rights (e.g., the right to choose where to live) participants often used social conventional reasoning by suggesting that asylum-seekers should be content for even having the opportunity to live in the host country.

One interpretation of these findings is that, in the United Kingdom (and elsewhere), young people may be more willing to tolerate and support religious participation rights than non-religious participation rights, as the former offers no obvious benefits to asylum-seekers over British citizens. In contrast, supporting asylum-seekers' non-religious or secular self-determination rights might be viewed as affording them privileges (e.g., the right to decide where to live) not warranted given their non-citizenship status by providing advantages not afforded to citizens. In general, these findings are also consistent with research focusing on Dutch youth's attitudes towards Muslim religious beliefs and practices (Verkuyten & Slooter, 2007) and

provide important insights into the attitudes concerning the fair treatment of others, equality, and human rights.

### **Children Living Under Difficult Circumstances**

Children living under difficult social or political circumstances such as high crime contexts may be more vulnerable to rights violations, and their reasoning about rights can be influenced by these experiences. For example, a study of mixed-race South African children living in settings marked by high rates of violence (i.e., Cape Town, South Africa; South Africa Institute of Race Relations, 2004) found that participants were less likely to support participation rights and more likely to support protection rights compared to same-aged peers residing in less violent settings (Gilles et al., 2019; Ruck et al., 2011). Children's greater support for protection rights may be due to the setting in which the study took place. At the time of the study, South Africa had one of the highest murder rates in the world (Louw, 2007), potentially elevating the salience of protection rights. In addition, children's reasoning revealed that they were more likely to focus on the negative consequences of not having protection rights than any other type of explanation.

In addition, there have been studies focusing on adolescents who were removed from their homes and assigned to state care because of rights violations (e.g., physical abuse or neglect). Work in this area suggests these adolescents' perceptions and reasoning about children's rights were similar to the views of non-maltreated youth in previous work (Peterson-Badali & Ruck, 2008). Yet, the particular concerns that emerged from their unique circumstances influenced their understanding of rights. For instance, the rights they identified as salient were not simply a reflection of the rights they had experienced in their own life, but had an aspirational quality, such as regular meals, a right to education, and decision-making (Peterson-

Badali & Ruck, 2008; Ruck et al., 2016). These findings suggest that children do not have to personally experience having certain rights met or fulfilled in order to view them as salient and talk about them. At the same time, children may focus their attention on those rights that remain to be fulfilled in their lives.

Regarding cultural variability, an interesting study examining self-determination rights found stronger support for self-determination rights among U.S. and Swiss children than Chinese-Malaysian children, but Chinese-Malaysian children who identified as Buddhist advocated for self-determination rights more than those who identified as Christian. This difference may be due to the Buddhist tenets of human dignity and justice (Cherney & Shing, 2008; Karras et al., 2022). Even in societies often characterized as more traditional, young people support children's self-determination rights.

The research reviewed here illustrates the complexity and heterogeneity regarding how children and young people think and reason about their provision, participation, and protection rights. This work also highlights how their thinking about rights is informed by the diverse cultural contexts and lived experiences where they reside.

### **Awareness of Status Hierarchies that Perpetuate the Status Quo**

An important part of facilitating change and moving towards social equality is recognizing when social inequalities are violations of others' rights. Youth have been the source of historic changes, as evidenced by young people who have stood up to social injustice (Killen & Dahl, 2021). Recent examples include youth involved in activism and protests for change regarding gun control in the United States, Black Lives Matter, and climate change. Yet, in many school contexts across the globe, youth experience status hierarchies created by school

authorities, as ethnic and other biases may lead teachers to unfairly distribute leadership roles to students.

For example, a recent study investigated how youth evaluate and expect others to evaluate allocations of leadership duties that create biased status hierarchies (Killen et al., 2022). U.S. youth evaluated teachers' assignments of leadership roles across three conditions in which teachers either assigned leadership roles to all White students, all Latinx students, or both White and Latinx students equally. Whereas children (ages 8–10 years) did not evaluate these contexts differently, adolescents (ages 12–14 years) evaluated unequal allocations favoring White students as most unacceptable followed by unequal allocations favoring Latinx students, and viewed equal allocations as most acceptable. Thus, with age, adolescents evaluated unequal leadership allocations more negatively than did children. Whereas only adolescents viewed the teachers' actions in the unequal contexts as related to racial/ethnic bias, all participants viewed instances of teacher biases as wrong and unfair. The findings revealed that students distinguish between high and low status groups and view ethnic bias as unfair regarding the allocation of leadership roles in school contexts (Killen et al., 2022).

While recognizing discrimination as unfair reflects moral reasoning, the cultural context plays a major role in what types of discrimination children and adolescents may experience or evaluate. For example, a recent study with adolescents in Nepal investigated participants' expectations about friendships between peers from high- and low-socioeconomic status (SES) families (Grütter et al., 2021). Overall, Nepalese adolescents expected that parents of high-SES peers would disapprove of cross-group friendships, referencing rigid social hierarchies and high-SES parental concerns for preserving their "reputation." Expectations about parents of low-SES peers were that they would support cross-SES friendship citing moral concerns and the desire for

social mobility (Grütter et al., 2021). The desire for social mobility was also articulated by participants as the need for change. Thus, adolescents living in a culture characterized as very hierarchical were aware of systemic reasons that underlie SES biases. Given that adolescents often suffer emotionally when excluded from peer experiences, parental strategies could include preparing children for the possibility of SES-related discrimination and suggesting proactive strategies to prevent or interrupt it. Thus, protection as a human right extends to preparation for discrimination as well as nurturance.

### **Conclusions**

In sum, research and scholarship from a constructivist perspective has revealed new knowledge regarding the emergence and development of conceptions of social justice, and specifically social inequalities and rights. Conceptions and evaluations reveal underlying beliefs and attitudes about the social world. When discriminatory attitudes and beliefs about what makes someone entitled to resources or not deserving, or excluded or included, emerge in childhood and are left unchecked, these beliefs can justify inequalities or a denial of rights. Thus, understanding the variability, heterogeneity, and development of these attitudes and judgments is important for facilitating societal change.

The field of moral development has extended beyond a focus on justice to one that encompasses social justice and conceptions of social inequalities and human rights. Whereas Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1969) initially examined how children and adolescents considered the fair distribution of resources and the value of life, most of the early research was conducted with middle-income, culturally privileged participants, and the focus of the dilemmas posed centered on the same population. Importantly, the theoretical frameworks have evolved to

investigate a far broader set of questions that include social inequalities, social status hierarchies, discrimination, inequities, rights, and social justice.

These foci are relevant for understanding how racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice and bias intersect and influence conceptions of justice and fairness. The ultimate goal of this research is to effect change, for instance, through the implementation of new curricula and teacher training programs in schools to prepare teachers for discussing these issues in the classroom, as well as supporting parents to engage with their children about these issues in meaningful and impactful ways. Children think about social inequalities and human rights early in life, and it is never too soon to begin conversations about mutual respect and fair and just treatment for others, from a developmentally informed perspective.

## Statements Page

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### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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