Children’s and adolescents’ reasons for socially excluding others∗

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Social cognition
Moral development
Exclusion
Narrative
Peer interaction

ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to investigate children’s descriptions and evaluations of their reasons for leaving others out of a peer group. A total of 84 children (divided into 7-, 11-, and 17-year-old age groups) provided a narrative account of a time they excluded a peer and were subsequently asked to evaluate their reasons for exclusion. With age, children’s descriptions and evaluations of their reasons reflected increases in the perceived legitimacy of social-functioning concerns, whereas the youngest participants focused more exclusively on the moral consequences of exclusion. Analyses of children’s references to their own and others’ perspectives and emotions in their narrative accounts revealed that particular reasons for exclusion were related to distinct psychological construals of experiences. The findings shed light on how children of different ages use their social and moral understandings to make sense of their everyday interactions in peer groups.

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∗ The preparation of this manuscript was supported by a postdoctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) to the first author. We would like to thank Ryan Gilson for his help in collecting the narratives, and Reuben Cousins, Erin Hough, and Masha Komolova for their assistance with coding the data. We are also grateful to the principals, teachers, parents, and children of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School and Judge Memorial Catholic High School for their participation and support. Portions of this paper were presented at the meetings of the Jean Piaget Society (2010) and Society for Research on Adolescence (2010).

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0885-2014/$ – see front matter © 2012 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cogdev.2012.02.005
Social exclusion has been characterized as an act of relational aggression (Underwood & Buhrmester, 2007). When sustained and systematic, it becomes a serious concern both for the child who is chronically excluded and for the victimizer. Social exclusion is nevertheless a normative part of children’s social interaction (Horn, 2005), and almost all children will occasionally leave others out of the group. Little is known, however, about how children make sense of situations in which they themselves have excluded others, as research on social exclusion has focused on the psychological experience of being left out (Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel, & Williams, 1990), with less attention being paid to the experience of the person doing the excluding. Inasmuch as children’s exclusionary behavior is a normative aspect of their social lives, research documenting their interpretations and explanations of these experiences is crucial in revealing how children grapple with their own complex actions that both have the potential for causing distress to others and may be necessary for maintaining group functioning (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005). Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine children’s descriptions and evaluations of their own explanations for leaving others out of a peer group.

Research on children’s thinking about social exclusion has thus far limited itself to assessing how children evaluate the relative legitimacy of different types of reasons given for hypothetical instances of exclusion. These studies have revealed that, with increasing age, children judge some reasons for exclusion less negatively than others, influenced by the extent to which a reason evokes moral concerns, such as unfairness to the excluded peer, or social/personal concerns, such as group functioning or autonomy (Killen, Piscane, Lee-Kim, & Ardila-Rey, 2001; Killen & Stangor, 2001). An important contribution of these studies has been to demonstrate that children recognize that instances of peer exclusion involve moral considerations (e.g., avoiding harm or unfairness to others; Killen & Stangor, 2001) as well as social and individual goals (e.g., promoting group functioning; Bukowski & Sippola, 2001; Horn, 2005), and that children sometimes give priority to one and sometimes to the other. Further, with age, children appear to increasingly recognize the legitimacy of group functioning and autonomy concerns in justifying some forms of social exclusion.

However, reasons for exclusion in these studies were preselected by researchers in an effort to distinguish moral from social conventional considerations. Their findings therefore do not speak to the reasons that children themselves see as relevant to explaining and justifying their own acts of exclusion. This is a potentially significant limitation, as past research suggests that the meanings that children construct about their own sociomoral experiences and transgressions are complex, variable, and personally relevant in a way that their responses to hypothetical scenarios are not (Smetana et al., 1999; Turiel, 2008; Wainryb et al., 2005). Nor do previous studies identify age-related changes in how children construct explanations for their acts of exclusion. Given the nature and meaning of children’s peer groups change dramatically between early childhood and adolescence (Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994; Pugh & Hart, 1999), there is good reason to expect that children’s explanations for excluding others may also change with age. A goal of our study was thus to examine age-related patterns in 7-, 11-, and 17-year-olds’ descriptions and evaluations of their own reasons for social exclusion. This age range was selected because, during childhood and adolescence, young people develop an increasingly sophisticated ability to coordinate thinking about moral, social, and personal concerns (Smetana, in press).

Another limitation of previous work involving judgments of hypothetical situations is that exclusion is assessed in relative isolation. When making sense of their own exclusion experiences in real life, children may reflect not only on why they behaved the way they did, but also the broader psychological experience of leaving others out, including the extent to which excluders considered what they themselves wanted, how they regarded their own exclusionary behavior, or the extent to which they considered the potential for harm to the excluded peer or the excluded peer’s perspective on the situation. Thus, in the present study, we asked children to provide open-ended accounts of their own exclusionary behavior—accounts that can reveal their attempts to reconcile their own desires and understandings with a consideration of the needs and perspectives of others, and can therefore also reveal how children’s explanations for leaving others out of the peer group are associated with references to their own and others’ perspectives and emotions in the context of the event.
1. Method

1.1. Participants

The sample included 84 participants, 14 males and 14 females in each of three age groups: 7-year-olds (mean age 7–6, range 6–8 to 8–5), 11-year-olds (mean age 11–10, range 10–8 to 12–6), and 17-year-olds (mean age 16–9, range 15–5 to 18–0). Participants were middle-class and primarily Caucasian (74%; 11% Asian, 4% Hispanic, 11% other/mixed ethnicity), and attended local schools in a mid-size city in the western US.

1.2. Procedure

Data were drawn from a broader investigation of children’s narrative accounts of exclusion (Wainryb, Komolova, & Brehl, under review); only relevant procedures are described here. Individual interviews were conducted in private rooms at children’s schools. Interviews were audiotaped, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. During the interview, the interviewer first elicited a narrative account of a situation in which the participant and his/her peers excluded someone else from an activity. (“Tell me about a time when you and a group of kids were doing something together and another kid wanted to join in, but you guys didn’t let the kid join in and the kid got left out. Pick a time you remember really well and tell me everything you can remember.”) When the child appeared to have come to the end of this account, the interviewer asked, “Is there anything else you remember about that time?”

In narrating how they had excluded a peer, children could refer to their reasons early or late in their accounts and in more or less explicit ways, and some children (although very few) failed altogether to describe their reasons for excluding others. Thus, following their narratives, and before asking participants to evaluate their reasons, it was deemed necessary to directly ask children to explicitly state their reasons (“When [you/group] did [exclusionary behavior], why did [you/group] do that?”). Although participants’ prompted reasons for exclusion (i.e., the reasons elicited in response to this direct question) were not always identical to those they described spontaneously in their open-ended narratives, the pattern of individual participants’ references to particular categories was largely consistent across spontaneous and prompted reasons, with concordance rates above 80% for most reasons.

After stating their reasons in response to this explicit prompt, participants were asked to evaluate these prompted reasons (“Do you think that was a good reason or not such a good reason?”) and to justify their evaluations (“Why was it a good reason/not?”).

1.3. Coding

1.3.1. Reasons for exclusion

Participants’ narrative accounts and prompted reasons were coded for the presence (1) or absence (0) of five reasons for exclusion. Categories were derived from the narratives themselves, to avoid overlooking explanations that have not been previously identified. Participants could refer to multiple reasons in the same narrative and thus a given narrative could be coded into multiple categories. The five categories were: (a) dislike/aversive behavior, including references to disliking the excluded peer or the excluded peer’s past objectionable behavior, (b) qualifications, referring to the excluded peer’s lack of knowledge or skills resulting in a potential impediment to group activities, (c) the excluded peer’s outgroup status, determined on the basis of gender, age, novelty, or other arbitrary category membership that was not directly relevant to participating in the activity, (d) situational constraints, including mitigating circumstances, limited resources, or plans unrelated to the excluded peer, or (e) peer pressure to exclude, referring to instances in which the narrator succumbed to the desires of the group. Examples of each category are presented in Table 1.

1.3.2. Evaluations of reasons for exclusion

Evaluations of prompted reasons for exclusion were scored as not good (“A bad reason”), mixed/ambivalent (“Sort of good and sort of not”), or good (“It was okay”). For participants’ justifications of these evaluations, the presence (1) or absence (0) of each of the following categories of
### Table 1

Reasons for excluding others as a function of age (n = 28 per group).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for excluding others</th>
<th>Proportion of 7-year-olds’ narratives</th>
<th>Proportion of 11-year-olds’ narratives</th>
<th>Proportion of 17-year-olds’ narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dislike/aversive behavior</td>
<td>.18−</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.64+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g., “We didn’t invite this one girl because she’s not open-minded, she takes things too seriously. . . . we all feel weird around her.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td>.04−</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g., “We said he couldn’t play because . . . we thought he wasn’t good enough at basketball”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgroup</td>
<td>.11−</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.36+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g., “We were going to go to a party together after our game. . . . we told [some other kids] they couldn’t come because they weren’t on the basketball team. It was kind of a team thing, so.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational Constraints</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g., “We were playing piggyback wars. And then everyone got on their partner and there was no one without. And another kid wanted to play, and . . . we didn’t have any more people for him.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Pressure</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g., “We were jump roping and somebody else wanted to play with us, but then my friend said no. I wanted her to play with me, but my friend said no, and I said ok, because I wanted to play with my friend still.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: + Likelihood of response is significantly higher than expected.  
− Likelihood of response is significantly lower than expected.  
Participants could refer to multiple reasons in their narratives, and therefore proportions in each column may add to > 1.0.

justifications was scored: (a) moral concerns for the excluded peer (“It hurt her feelings, she felt left out”), (b) concerns about the relationship with the peer (“He won’t like us anymore”), (c) benefit to the peer (“We didn’t invite her to the mall because we thought she just really needed the sleep”), (d) group functioning concerns related to the peer (“I know I don’t work well with her”), (e) group functioning concerns unrelated to the peer (“Me and my friend wanted to play together for just, like ten or fifteen minutes just to talk and catch up”), (f) autonomy (“I should be able to talk to my friends about what I want to talk about”), (g) alternatives to exclusion (“We could have just made new teams instead of leaving him out”), (h) avoidance (“I didn’t try harder to talk to her because I was having fun and I was trying not to pay attention to the problem of her not being included”).

1.3.3. Psychological features of narrative accounts

In addition to coding the reasons for exclusion, narrative accounts were also coded for the presence (1) or absence (0) of five categories of psychological features that reflected relevant aspects of participants’ construals of their experiences. The selection of psychological elements was based on previous research on children’s and adolescents’ narrative accounts of harming their peers (Wainryb et al., 2005). These included: (a) narrator’s prescriptive beliefs (“I shouldn’t have done it”), (b) narrator’s perspective (i.e., informational beliefs and goals; “I thought they were going to come along”), (c) excluded peer’s perspective (“She really wanted to hang out with us”), (d) narrator’s emotions (“I felt bad for him”), and (e) excluded peer’s emotions (“She looked sad”).

1.3.4. Scoring reliability

Interrater reliability was assessed through the independent scoring of 20% of the transcripts by a second coder. Cohen’s ks for all codes were acceptable (ks for reasons > .81, for evaluations of reasons k = .85, for justifications for evaluations of reasons, ks > .70, and for psychological features ks > .87).
2. Results

Data were based on dichotomous variables, and thus chi-square tests were used for analyses; adjusted standardized residuals were used to identify cells in which observed and expected frequencies of responses were significantly different (p < .05, one-tailed). In these cases, Cramer’s V is reported as a measure of effect size. Preliminary analyses examining links between gender and other variables revealed that less than 5% of these tests (i.e., 1 of 24) were statistically significant. Thus, gender effects were not considered further.

2.1. Children’s descriptions and evaluations of their reasons for exclusion

We first examined the reasons that 7-, 11- and 17-year-olds gave to explain why they had excluded a peer from their group. Because participants could refer to multiple reasons in their narratives, a separate chi-square was conducted for each reason (i.e., presence/absence of each reason by age group). Results are presented in Table 1. Superscripts denote when reasons were used proportionally more or less frequently in particular age groups (i.e., deviations from chance expectations). With increasing age, reasons related to dislike/aversive behavior were used more often (Cramer’s V = .39), as were reasons related to the excluded peer’s outgroup status (V = .25). The narratives of the youngest participants were also less likely to include references to the excluded peer’s lack of qualifications (V = .23). In contrast, the use of reasons related to situational constraints and peer pressure did not vary with age.

Next, based on responses to the explicit follow-up probes, we examined 7-, 11-, and 17-year-olds’ evaluations of their reasons. Results are based on a chi-square test examining the association between age group and type of evaluation (V = .29). With age, negative evaluations became less frequent and mixed evaluations more frequent. Specifically, negative evaluations were more likely than expected for 7-year-olds (93%) and less likely for 17-year-olds (50%); 11-year-olds’ tendency to make negative evaluations did not deviate from chance expectations (56%). In turn, mixed evaluations were less likely than expected for 7-year-olds (7%) and more likely for 17-year-olds (39%); 11-year-olds’ responses did not deviate from chance expectations (30%). Positive evaluations of reasons were less likely than expected for 7-year-olds (0%) and did not deviate from chance for 11- (15%) and 17-year-olds (11%).

Because the 7-year-olds tended to evaluate all reasons as uniformly negative, they were excluded from a subsequent analysis examining whether participants evaluated some types of reasons more positively than others. Thus, collapsing across 11- and 17-year-olds, we compared “not good” to “mixed”/“good” evaluations. A separate chi-square was conducted for each reason (i.e., presence/absence of reason by evaluation type). Dislike/aversive behavior (V = .27) and the excluded peer’s lack of qualifications to participate in group activities (V = .24) were evaluated less negatively as reasons (39% and 33% negative evaluations, respectively). In contrast, exclusion on the basis of the excluded peer’s outgroup status was evaluated more negatively (71% negative evaluations; V = .24). Situational constraints tended to be evaluated less negatively as a reason for exclusion (36% negative) whereas peer pressure was evaluated more negatively (69% negative). However, neither of these latter effects was statistically significant.

Finally, we examined children’s justifications for evaluating reasons as not good, mixed, or good (Table 2). A separate chi-square was conducted for each justification (i.e., presence/absence of justification by evaluation type). When reasons were described as “not good”, these evaluations were often justified on the basis of moral concerns, whereas moral concerns were never used to explain positive evaluations (V = .49). Justifications related to negative consequences for relationships were also frequently used for negative evaluations of reasons (V = .29). In turn, unequivocally “good” evaluations of reasons were justified primarily on the basis of group functioning concerns related to the excluded peer (V = .68). Not surprisingly, mixed evaluations were justified on the basis of both moral and group functioning concerns (V = .38 for group functioning concerns unrelated to the excluded peer). However, explanations for mixed evaluations also included references to potential benefits to the excluded peer as a result of being left out (V = .31), individual or group autonomy (V = .31), possible alternatives to exclusion (V = .29), and participants’ avoidance-related motivations (V = .27).
Table 2
Justifications for negative, mixed, and positive evaluations of reasons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Negative evaluation of reason (n = 47)</th>
<th>Mixed evaluation of reason (n = 21)</th>
<th>Positive evaluation of reason (n = 7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proportion of justifications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.00-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.00-</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit to peer</td>
<td>.00−</td>
<td>.14+</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group functioning related to peer</td>
<td>.00−</td>
<td>.57+</td>
<td>.57+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group functioning unrelated to peer</td>
<td>.04−</td>
<td>.33+</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>.00−</td>
<td>.14+</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternatives to exclusion</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.29+</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.24+</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * Likelihood of response is significantly higher than expected.
− Likelihood of response is significantly lower than expected.

Nine participants are excluded from this analysis due to interviewer error. Proportions in each column may sum to >1.00 because participants could offer more than one justification for an evaluation. Nevertheless, each participant contributed only one evaluation to statistical analyses. In the few cases when a participant provided different evaluations of multiple reasons, the response was coded as “mixed.”

2.2. Relations between reasons and psychological features of narrative accounts of exclusion

Our last set of analyses concerned associations between reasons for exclusion and references to various psychological features of narrators’ experiences of excluding others. Specifically, we examined whether some reasons for exclusion were more often accompanied by references to prescriptive beliefs about exclusion, as well as references to their own and the excluded peer’s perspectives (informational beliefs, goals) and emotions during the event. To examine these patterns, we conducted a series of chi-square tests to examine the relative likelihood of each psychological feature (i.e., prescriptive belief, narrator’s perspective, excluded peer’s perspective, narrator’s emotion, excluded peer’s emotion) occurring in the presence/absence of each reason for exclusion. (Preliminary analyses revealed that children’s references to their own perspectives became more frequent with age, V = .38. Therefore, although our N did not permit us to systematically explore links between reasons and psychological features separately within each age group, we did examine whether the overall pattern of links between reasons and psychological features was consistent within age groups. As a result, one of 8 significant chi-square tests is omitted below, as it appeared to be an artifact of an age-related trend.)

Narratives referring to dislike/aversive behavior were more likely to include references to prescriptive beliefs (42%) than narratives that did not refer to this reason for exclusion (24%; V = .20). In contrast, when exclusion was depicted as being due to the excluded peer’s lack of qualifications, narrators were more likely to refer to both their own (85%) and the excluded peer’s perspectives (77%) than in the absence of this reason (61% for own and 52% for other’s perspective; both Vs = .18). There were no associations between exclusion on the basis of outgroup status and narrators’ references to psychological features. Participants who described exclusion on the basis of situational constraints were unlikely to describe their own emotions in their narratives (15% as compared to 33% in the absence of this reason; V = .18). Narratives that explained exclusion in terms of peer pressure were more likely to refer to prescriptive beliefs about the exclusion (54%) than those not referring to peer pressure (21%; V = .33). Finally, participants who depicted exclusion on the basis of peer pressure were also more likely to refer to their own (50%) and the other’s emotions (35%) than those who did not describe peer pressure (17% for own and 14% for other’s emotions; Vs = .34 and .24, respectively).

3. Discussion

3.1. How do children describe their own reasons for excluding others?

Although it is well known that social exclusion serves as a normative means for regulating the functioning of social groups and carving out a sense of autonomy (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001; Horn, 2005),
little is known about how children make sense of times when they excluded others. Our first goal was to examine participants’ evolving descriptions and evaluations of their own reasons for excluding others. Our results revealed that reasons related to dislike, the excluded peer’s lack of qualifications, and the excluded peer’s status as an outgroup member became more frequent with age. Thus, older children increasingly attended to the social complexities implicated in their own exclusion experiences—a pattern consistent with research underscoring age-related increases in the salience of peer group norms (Abrams, Rutland, Cameron, & Marques, 2003) and the social functions that they serve (Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 1983).

In contrast to the variety of reasons given by older children, 7-year-olds predominantly described exclusion as resulting from uncontrollable situational constraints (e.g., “There was just no more room at the table”) or peer pressure (e.g., “I wouldn’t have cared if he played, but my friends didn’t want him to”). Thus, younger participants selectively described reasons for exclusion that depicted them as relatively blameless. In one respect, this finding extends research involving hypothetical scenarios, indicating that young children are primarily concerned with preventing harm and unfairness (Killen & Stangor, 2001). More important, however, neither of these reasons for exclusion has been previously examined in research on children’s reasoning about hypothetical events. In this respect, our study reveals a gap in our knowledge of the two reasons for exclusion that are most salient in young children’s own stories. Specifically, young children’s accounts of their own experiences reveal an unwillingness or inability to describe their roles as intentional agents of exclusion who may have legitimate reasons to leave others out of the group. These findings stand in contrast to reports of young children’s exclusionary behavior, which imply that more intentional acts of exclusion are relatively common at this age (Paley, 1992). Thus, our results imply that programs aimed at promoting socially inclusive classrooms, particularly in the early elementary years, might be well-served by helping young children to consider the variety of agentic reasons that could underlie their exclusionary behavior and thus take ownership over their own actions, given their apparent reluctance or incapacity to do so spontaneously.

3.2. How do children evaluate their reasons for excluding others?

Participants were also asked to evaluate their reasons for exclusion. In some respects, our results are in line with a large body of research documenting age-related changes in children’s reliance on moral, group functioning, and autonomy concerns as justifications for exclusion (Horn, 2003, 2006; Killen & Stangor, 2001). But more significantly, our findings extend, and to some extent also challenge, the previous literature. Specifically, the justifications that children provided when evaluating their own reasons for exclusion did not simply duplicate those that children use to explain their evaluations of others’ exclusionary behavior, as assessed by their third-person judgments about hypothetical scenarios. Rather, participants’ thinking about their own reasons for excluding others provide intriguing new insight into children’s actual experiences. First, across all age groups, in addition to moral considerations, concerns for present and future relationships with the targets of exclusion were used to explain negative evaluations of reasons (e.g., “If you leave friends out, you won’t have many friends left to play with”). These justifications suggest that exclusion experiences occur not as isolated incidents but rather in the context of ongoing relationships with others and reflect children’s awareness of the potential fragility of these ties (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). Further, children who made ambivalent judgments of their own reasons for exclusion referred to avoidance-related motivations (e.g., “I was just avoiding it because I didn’t want to deal with her getting left out”), or reflected on alternatives to exclusion (e.g., “Well, it was kind of a good reason and kind of not; I left him out because I really didn’t want to get into another argument with him, but we could probably have avoided the argument”). Thus, in some cases, young people appeared to engage in strategies aimed at numbing their awareness of the emotional consequences of leaving others out (Wainryb et al., under review), whereas in other cases, they spontaneously considered possible alternatives to leaving others out of the group. Arguably, inasmuch as the latter strategy uniquely reflects children’s awareness of their own capacity to behave differently in the future, it would be helpful to for future studies to explore the distinct correlates of each type of reasoning.
3.3. How are children’s reasons for exclusion related to the broader psychological landscapes of their narrative accounts?

Analyses of children’s narrative accounts are well-suited to elucidating how they construct meanings about their experiences (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). In this study, we capitalized on this strategy to examine how children’s reasons for exclusion were associated with their psychological construals of experiences. Our findings revealed that children’s references to perspectives, emotions, and prescriptive beliefs showed unique patterns of association with each reason for exclusion. These observed differences highlight the added value of asking children to describe their own actual experiences, by revealing the particular meanings that children may be attributing to their own exclusionary actions that follow from different sorts of reasons.

More specifically, when considered alongside their explicit evaluations of their reasons, children’s accounts of exclusion on the basis of dislike/aversive behavior and the excluded peer’s lack of qualifications suggested considerable ambivalence surrounding these experiences. First, although participants often described their peers’ aversive behavior as a relatively valid reason for exclusion, narratives about excluding a disliked peer also included references to children’s prescriptive beliefs about the undesirability of exclusion. This finding is heartening, given the prevalence of this justification; indeed, among 17-year-olds, this was by far the most frequent reason they cited for excluding another. Nevertheless, at least in retrospect, children who excluded others on the basis of dislike appeared to be somewhat conflicted about the validity of this reason. This finding may provide an initial entrée for interventions aimed at helping widely disliked victims of exclusion become reintegrated into the wider peer group, by capitalizing on these doubts about the legitimacy of leaving out undesirable others.

Second, when narrators described experiences in which a peer’s lack of qualifications interfered with the group’s goals, their own perspectives were quite salient (e.g., “We thought he wasn’t good enough”). However, they also expressed explicit awareness of the divergent perspectives of their excluded peer (e.g., “He didn’t know how to ski and he wanted to learn”). This pattern is consistent with other research examining children’s accounts of harming their peers, which reveals that narrators tend to concern themselves with how they affect others while simultaneously asserting their own justifiable intentions or mitigating circumstances that serve to explain why they did so (Baumeister et al., 1990; Wainryb et al., 2005). This dual focus on self and other implies that, in reflecting on experiences when they have acted as the agents of harm, children are attempting to reconcile their own desires and understandings with a consideration of the needs of others.

Relative to other instances of exclusion (and especially as compared to those narratives explaining exclusion on the basis of situational constraints), the pattern for narratives depicting peer pressure suggests that these events may be recalled as emotional experiences for narrators, in addition to the targets of exclusion. Specifically, narrators were particularly likely to describe both their own (e.g., guilt) and the excluded child’s emotions (e.g., sadness) in these accounts. Interestingly, in these cases, they also often referred to their own prescriptive beliefs about the exclusion (e.g., “People should be more accepting.”). This finding underscores that, inasmuch as social exclusion necessarily occurs in the context of groups, even children who are broadly characterized as “excluders” can play multiple distinct roles in these events (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). For this reason, although in some cases children may experience their exclusionary behavior as quite intentional, in other cases, they may perceive themselves to be more constrained by external pressure. Our results suggest that, when children describe events in which their perspective is distinct from that of the larger group, the negative emotional aspects of these experiences come to the fore. This may occur because the narrator’s distance affords her or him an opportunity to reflect critically on the group’s goals, and thus question the legitimacy of exclusion when it was not they themselves that were directly responsible for leaving someone out. At the same time, references to their own guilt or sadness may speak to the narrator’s simultaneous reluctance to exclude and strong desire to fit in.

4. Conclusions

The present study is unique in investigating children’s explanations for excluding others across a wide age range, especially as complemented by a consideration of the broader psychological features
of children’s experiences of exclusion. Although in some cases limited statistical power precluded us from conducting more fine-grained analyses, the findings suggest a number of possible avenues for future research and intervention. Certainly, our results demonstrate that children’s understandings of their own experiences of exclusion may not be adequately captured in their entirety by their responses to hypothetical scenarios. Further, our findings underscore the importance of considering age-related changes in children’s construals of their exclusionary actions. Related to this point, it is abundantly clear that a “one-size-fits-all” model of social exclusion does not adequately explain children’s actual experiences of leaving others out of the peer group, perhaps accounting for the limited success of some interventions based on blanket injunctions against this behavior (Harrist & Bradley, 2003). In this respect, we argue that research on social exclusion could benefit from a fuller recognition of this variability and complexity in young peoples’ subjective construals of their own experiences, thus setting the stage for programs that may help young people to more critically and deliberatively weigh their multiple and varying goals and concerns.

References


Wainryb, C., Komolova, M., & Breihl, B. Children’s and adolescents’ narrative accounts and judgments of their own peer-exclusion experiences. Under review.