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Black-White Racial Context and U.S. American Youths' Moral Judgments of and Responses to Social Exclusion Bullying

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ABSTRACT

Bullied adolescents experience myriad poor outcomes, yet certain responses can have significant mitigatory effects. However, research has yet to examine how the racial context of these interactions affects adolescents' evaluations of and beliefs about responding to social-exclusionary bullying (SEB). The sample comprised 219 ninth-grade Black ($N=84$; females = 46) and White ($N=135$; females = 81) students (M_{age} = 14.84, SD = 0.68; $N_{females}$= 92) recruited from 5 schools in a large, racially diverse, middle-class Mid-Atlantic metropolitan area of the United States. Participants judged the wrongfulness of 4 scenarios of same- and cross-race SEB and selected how the victims should respond to the victimization. Responses were coded as aggressive, assertive, adult assistance-seeking, or avoidant. Gender, scenario, and response strategy main and interaction effects emerged. The Black-excluder and White-victim scenario was rated least wrong. Assertive responses were selected more often in scenarios with White-excluders; avoidant responses were selected more often in scenarios with Black-excluders. Results suggest that racial context relates significantly to adolescents' evaluations of and responses to SEB scenarios.

Bullying is a pervasive phenomenon among adolescents, affecting approximately one in five middle- and high-school students in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Defined as aggressive behavior intended to harm a less powerful individual (Volk et al., 2014), and often conceptualized as occurring repeatedly (Olweus, 1993), bullying experiences are not the innocuous rites of passage they were once deemed. Rather, bullying yields numerous short- and long-term consequences for both victims and victimizers, including poor health, academic, social, and financial outcomes (Copeland et al., 2013; Hymel & Swearer, 2015). While bullying is pervasive among all youth (Wolke et al., 2013), racial and ethnic minority youth are disproportionately targeted (Webb et al., 2021). When individuals are the targets of bullying because of their race, such victimization experiences may have even *more* deleterious effects (Rosenthal et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2020; and see Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017). Specifically, the consequences of racial prejudice and discrimination—experiences which independently contribute to children and adolescents' emotional problems, high rates of depression, low self-esteem, and negative stress—synergistically compound the already harmful consequences of bullying victimization (Rosenthal et al., 2015; Szalacha et al., 2003; Xu et al., 2020).

Social exclusion

Relational bullying—a form of nonphysical aggression intended to damage an individual's relationships, reputation, or social standing by way of direct or indirect behaviors (Leff et al., 2010; Low et al., 2010)—grows increasingly prevalent in adolescence (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Killen & Rutland, 2011; Low et al., 2010). Peer social exclusion is one form of relational bullying and leads to innumerable negative consequences, including anxiety, depression, poor peer relationships, and lack of academic motivation (Casper & Card, 2017; Juvonen & Graham, 2014). Even though adolescents report that social exclusion occurs as frequently as physical bullying, it has less often been the focus of research as compared to other forms of bullying that are more easily observable (i.e., physical, verbal; Seals & Young, 2003) and considered more severe and harmful (Hodson et al., 2010). When social exclusion has been examined, frequently the focus has been on scenarios of one-time exclusion (e.g., Alsamih & Tenenbaum, 2018; Brenick & Killen, 2014; Brenick & Romano, 2016; Cooley et al., 2019; Palmer et al., 2015). A key component of the definition of bullying is the *repeated* nature of the experience, which is also a distinction that may make clear the wrongfulness of the behavior, thereby differentially influencing perceptions and subsequent behaviors by victims and bystanders (see Olweus, 1993).

Intergroup social exclusion

Social exclusion based on racial identity is a form of discriminatory relational bullying when repeated, purposeful, and occurring in a power-imbalanced relationship. It may be perceived to be less harmful than physical bullying though it can be equally detrimental (Hodson et al., 2010). Discrimination, defined as negative behavior such as racial harassment, directed toward outgroup members (Brown, 2010; Romero & Roberts, 1998) is a common experience for children and adolescents—especially those from racial, cultural, sexual, gender, and religious minority groups (Brown, 2008; Costello, 2016; Xu et al., 2020). Minority youth are often targets of social exclusion (Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017; Mendez et al., 2012; Rigby, 2008; Xu et al., 2020) and are more likely than victims from majority groups to experience racial and ethnic harassment and discriminatory bullying by peers, the consequences of which cannot be overstated (Boulton, 1995; Costello, 2016; Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Xu et al., 2020).

Response strategies

Importantly, though, research has shown that certain victim responses can significantly reduce both the duration of bullying and its associated negative outcomes (Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2011). One longitudinal study with elementary school-aged children found advice-seeking and calm-but-assertive conflict resolution behaviors to be associated with more positive outcomes for victims, including fewer internalizing problems (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004). Likewise, adolescent victims of bullying who used more passive responses (e.g., ignore the bully) experienced fewer social-emotional problems than those who used aggressive strategies (e.g., physical fighting; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2011).

Utilization of response strategies does, however, vary by individual characteristics, such as gender, as well as contextual characteristics, such as type of victimization experience. More specifically, girls tend to employ strategies focused on seeking social and emotional support, whereas boys tend to react more aggressively. Moreover, individuals, in general, have reported seeking social support significantly more often when faced with an attack on their property than more covert forms of victimization such as social exclusion; (Kristensen & Smith, 2003; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2011). Further, when faced with bullying scenarios, many youth utilize less effective response and coping strategies (e.g., physical aggression; Champion et al., 2003; withdrawal/avoidance, Bellmore et al., 2013; sadness/submissiveness, retaliation; Sokol et al., 2016) even if they report knowing other strategies are more effective. Specifically, adolescents in one

study rated "victim confidence," a response characterized by the use of calm assertiveness rather than provocation, to be most effective. However, they were most likely to report *using* angry (e.g., retaliation) or sad (e.g., withdrawn, submissive behaviors) responses if they themselves were the victims (Sokol et al., 2016).

Thus, there is a need to examine the contextual factors that contribute to this incongruity between the strategies adolescents believe to be most efficacious in responding to bullying and those they actually employ, especially in interracial contexts (e.g., Palmer et al., 2015). For instance, even when armed with skills to respond prosocially to bullying scenarios, group-norms about aggression (Sentse et al., 2015) or intergroup relations (Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017; Brenick & Romano, 2016) dictating how one *should* respond in interracial contexts might prevent the utilization of such strategies. Previous studies have examined youth evaluations (judgments–how good or bad an act of victimization is, and justifications–why) of cross-race victimization, broadly, as well as their inclusion/exclusion decisions, that is whether an ingroup/outgroup individual should be included or excluded (e.g., Alsamih & Tenenbaum, 2018; Brenick & Romano, 2016; Cooley et al., 2019; Thijs, 2017- note, these are primarily not bullying victimization scenarios), as well as how bystanders should respond in these hypothetical victimization scenarios (e.g., Gönültaş & Mulvey, 2022; Mulvey et al., 2016). Still, unique from these broader evaluations and from the perspective of bystanders, we do not know whether racial context and/or judgments of hypothetical SEB scenarios relate to response behaviors of the victim (Cooley et al., 2019). For instance, youth can view a cross-race bullying scenario simply as occurring between individuals of different races or as discriminatory victimization targeting an individual because of their race. The possibility that racial context could contribute to the use of different victim response strategies in SEB has not yet been explored fully.

The aforementioned findings regarding victim response strategies have important implications for school-based bullying intervention and prevention programs. While the primary goal of most such programs is to prevent or reduce rates of bullying, it is critical to empower students with the skills and self-efficacy to respond to bullying—if or when it does occur—in ways that can effectively stop and prevent future victimization, thereby mitigating its negative consequences (Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2011).

Theoretical framework

Given that White youth have been shown to judge intergroup SEB differently than same-group bullying (i.e., same- vs. cross-race social exclusion; Margie, 2007), and that girls are less accepting of intergroup social exclusion than are boys (e.g., Brenick & Romano, 2016), it is imperative to consider that individuals' utilization of response strategies may be related to judgments based on the racial and gender context of the bullying scenarios (e.g., Santos & Toomey, 2018; Scott et al., 2020). The Social Domain Model (Smetana et al., 2014; Turiel, 1983) provides a theoretical framework through which youths' judgments of social interactions, such as intergroup social exclusion, can be systematically evaluated and understood. Specifically, this model asserts that individuals reason about victimization through three domains of social thought: *moral* considerations of justice, welfare, and equality; *societal* conventions, expectations, and group norms; and *psychological* constructs of personal preference or choice.

The prioritization or interplay of these domains when evaluating a social interaction (e.g., intergroup social exclusion) determines how individuals rate the acceptability of victimization and what—or whether—action should be taken to address it (see Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017; Horn & Nucci, 2006; Nucci & Turiel, 2009; Palmer & Abbott, 2018). Because social interactions are complex, contextualized, and typically appeal to multiple domains of social thought, multi-faceted transgressions—those for which moral, societal, and psychological concerns all compete to be prioritized—may be viewed as more acceptable than those that fall squarely in the moral domain. For example, not inviting someone of a different race to a party may be viewed simply as one's personal choice and therefore acceptable, even though the situation likely also involves

moral and societal concerns as well (Brenick & Romano, 2016; Killen et al., 2002). Contextual factors too, such as the race of excluders and/or victims in a scenario of SEB, contributes to the complexity of reasoning about social transgressions (Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017; Rutland & Killen, 2015).

Previous research on the Social Domain Model and its adaptation into the Social Reasoning Developmental (SRD) perspective (Rutland & Killen, 2015) shows this complexity in action. By examining the influences of both morality and group processes on evaluations of social exclusion, the SRD perspective asserts that group identity, social conventions, and norms, as well as moral principles, influence evaluations of intergroup exclusion. For instance, youth differ in their evaluations of social exclusion for same- versus cross-group victimization (Rutland & Killen, 2015)—an effect that is moderated by ingroup or outgroup status (Brenick & Killen, 2014; Brenick & Romano, 2016; Rutland & Killen, 2015). Specifically, reasoning about victimization in cross-race contexts—particularly those in which the victim is a member of a marginalized group, both racial minorities and girls—utilizes the moral domain more than same-race scenarios or scenarios in which the victim is a member of the majority group. Further, minoritized youth are more likely to view social exclusion by the majority group not just as interpersonal, but also as discriminatory—and, thus, as a moral transgression (Brenick et al., 2012). When children deem social exclusion based on race to be wrong, they cite moral concerns, but when they accept discriminatory exclusion, they do so based on stereotyped beliefs about groups and group dynamics (Abrams et al., 2014; Alsamih & Tenenbaum, 2018; Brenick & Killen, 2014; Malti et al., 2012; Tenenbaum et al., 2017). Thus, depending on a) the racial context of a bullying scenario or b) the covert nature of certain forms of bullying (i.e., social exclusion), adolescents might not interpret particular bullying situations to be *wrong* (Cooley et al., 2019)—or as bullying at all—which influences their subsequent responses.

The current study addressed the aforementioned gaps in the existing literature by: (1) examining the relation between the racial composition of excluder-victim dyads in peer group social exclusion situations and adolescents' (a) judgments about the SEB and (b) their response strategy selection; while also (2) accounting for participant race in a sample comprised of both Black and White adolescents and (3) comparing cross- and same-race scenarios. Whereas literature on the exact topic is lacking, based on the related research described above, it was hypothesized that participants' judgments of SEB would differ depending on the racial context of the bullying scenario and the race and gender of the respondent. Specifically, it was hypothesized that (1) ingroup members would judge the social exclusion of ingroup members to be more wrong than the social exclusion of outgroup members; this is due to the aforementioned significant role group dynamics play in evaluations of social exclusion as well as the likelihood that ingroup members would be more likely to view the social exclusion as discriminatory. Further, (2) girls were predicted to rate the social exclusion scenarios as more wrong overall as compared to boys and to be more likely to select non-aggressive responses or responses that deal with the confrontation in a positive prosocial way (e.g., speak up for themselves assertively, ask for help). In addition, it was hypothesized that (3) the selection of different response behaviors would differ depending on the racial context of the scenario–that is, the racial composition of the excluder-victim dyad, and the race of the participant, and would likely represent differences in stereotyped expectations (e.g., Black boys are stereotypically seen as violent or aggressive) of how individuals of certain races should or do respond in a given same- or cross-race context. This was an exploratory hypothesis given the lack of previous research in the specific area.

Method

Participants

Participants were 219 ninth grade Black ($N = 84$; females $= 46$) and White ($N = 135$; females $= 81$) students ($M_{age} = 14.84$, $SD = 0.68$; $N_{females} = 92$) recruited from 5 schools in a large, racially

diverse, middle-class Mid-Atlantic metropolitan area of the United States. Participants were drawn from a larger sample of all ninth-grade students in the participating schools. The focus of this study was on the students who identified as Black or White because these were the two largest racial groups in the surveyed schools and surrounding areas, and because of the unique historical Black-White dynamics in the U.S.

Measures

Participants completed the *Peer Relationship Survey* (Margie, 2007) which consisted of three sections: (1) *Attributions of Intent*, (2) *Evaluations of Social Exclusion*, and (3) *Bully/Victim Experience*. The current study focused on data from the second section of the survey—specifically, participants' judgments of and responses to four social exclusion scenarios.

Evaluations of social exclusion

This subsection of the *Peer Relationship Survey* presented participants with four scenarios depicting social exclusion as a means to bully in same- and cross-race peer dyads. The four scenarios and sets of follow-up questions were developed based on everyday social exclusion situations and questions from previous studies on bullying, social reasoning, and social information processing (i.e., Killen et al., 2002; Rigby & Slee, 1993, 1995; Ruck et al., 2015; Tisak, 1995; Turiel, 1983). Two different sets of scenarios were written, one with all female characters and the other with all male characters, so that surveys could be matched to participant gender. Each scenario depicted, both pictorially and in written form, a victim requesting to join a group (specifically, (1) playing basketball on the school playground, (2) sitting at a particular lunch table, (3) participating in a music club, or (4) going to the mall after school with fellow students), but being directly excluded by one member of the group. It was stated that *"[the excluder] has been doing this to [the victim] for the past few weeks"* to establish the repeated nature of the social exclusion (see Figure 1 for sample full scenario and questions). Additionally, in order to examine the role of race in responses to social exclusion scenarios, the race of the characters in the scenarios was varied to present all combinations of Black and White victims and excluders (see Table 1). We conducted a systematic analysis to ensure there was no bias of confounding certain racial parings by scenario, as was done in this study for ease of administration by pen-and-paper surveys with this sample size and data entry. The results of analyses of the variation of the scenarios (i.e., a separate administration of a full randomization of all racial pairings *and* all scenarios) revealed there were no significant associations between racial pairing, scenario content, and the dependent variables ($ps > .05$).

Each social exclusion bullying scenario was followed by a series of questions. First, participants were asked to judge how "good" or "bad" the excluder's actions in the scenario were (using an 8-point Likert scale ranging from *"Very, Very Good"* to *"Very, Very Bad"*; judgment) and to justify why it was good or bad for the excluder to do this (e.g., *"Because [the victim] probably did something to deserve it," "Because it might hurt [the victim's] feelings,"*; not included in the present analyses).

Next, after judging the scenarios, participants were asked, *"What would you do if you were [the victim]?"* (response strategy). Participants selected one of five response strategies, or wrote their own, that were categorized as either aggressive, assertive, adult assistance-seeking, or avoidant response strategies (see below and Table 2). Participants were able to select only one response and the response category (e.g., aggressive, assertive, etc.) was coded as a 1 if selected or a 0 if not selected. Any participant responses that were antisocial, intentionally harmful, or that used behavior, words, relationships with others, or physical violence to get something from—or to get back at—the excluder were coded as aggressive response strategies. In contrast, participant responses such as, *"Join the game anyway,"* were coded as assertive because they depicted the victim taking charge, not giving in to the excluder, and independently dealing with

> *"Taylor and Emily are sitting together at lunch. Sarah comes up to their table, tells them that she and a bunch of other kids are going to the mall after school, and asks Emily if she wants to comes. She does not invite Taylor. Sarah has been doing this for a few weeks."*

Emily   Taylor   Sarah
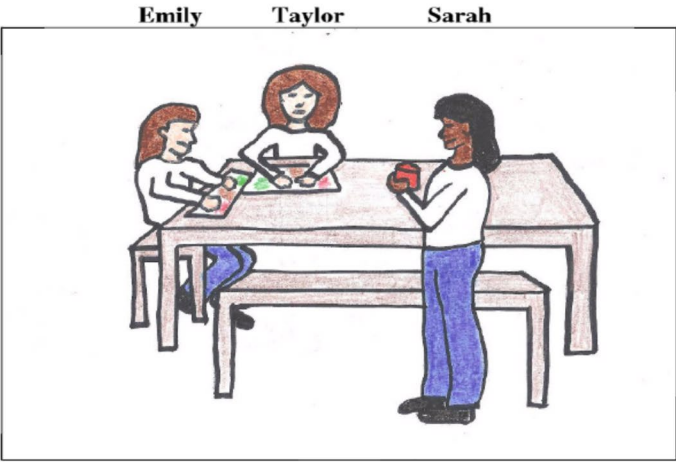
How good or bad is it for Sarah to do this?

○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Very, Very Good	Very Good	Somewhat Good	A Little Good	A Little Bad	Somewhat Bad	Very Bad	Very, Very Bad

What would you do if you were Taylor? (Choose one)
I would call Sarah a name. (Coded as "aggressive)
I would ask Sarah if I could go too. (Coded as "assertive")
I would hit Sarah. (Coded as "aggressive")
I would tell a teacher. (Coded as "adult assistance seeking")
I would just ignore Sarah and go home after school. (Coded as "avoidant")
*Other:*_____

Figure 1. Sample social exclusion bullying scenario and participant judgment and response strategy questions.*Note.* Response strategy *"I would call Sarah a name."* was originally coded as "verbal aggression" and response strategy *"I would hit Sarah."* was originally coded as "physical aggression." They were collapsed into a code of "aggression" because both were used infrequently.

Table 1. Ethnicity of bullies and victims in social exclusion bullying scenarios.

Scenario Description	Ethnicity of Excluder	Ethnicity of Victim
Not allowed to join basketball game	White	Black
Not allowed to sit at lunch table	Black	Black
Not allowed to join music club	White	White
Not invited to mall	Black	White

Table 2. Coding for response selection.

Category	Description
Aggressive	Antisocial; intentionally harmful behavior; using words, relationships with others, or physical violence to get something from/get back at excluder *"I would call [the excluder] a name."* *"I would hit [the excluder]."* *"I would start another club that keeps [the excluder] out."*
Assertive	Taking charge; independently dealing with confrontation in positive way; not giving in to exclusion • Participants might refer to bystanders rather than excluder *"I would tell [the excluder] it's not their decision and ask the other players."* • Participants might ignore excluder's efforts to exclude altogether *"Join the game anyway."*
Adult Assistance	Asking a parent, teacher, or other adult for help *"I would tell a teacher."*
Avoidant	Trying to avoid confrontation; not engaging excluder or bystanders; taking no action or an action that does not address the incident/issue *"I wouldn't ask to play anymore."* *"I would find other people to play with."* *"I would get over it."*

the confrontation in a positive way. Responses that involved calling upon bystanders in the situation, such as *"I would tell [the excluder] it's not their decision and ask the other players,"* were also coded as assertive response strategies. Responses that involved seeking help from a teacher, parent, or other adult, such as *"I would tell a teacher,"* were coded as adult assistance-seeking response strategies. Finally, any response in which the victim took an action that did not address the incident (*"Get over it"*) or avoided confrontation without engaging the excluder or bystander(s) (*"I wouldn't ask to play anymore," "I would find other people to play with"*) was coded as an avoidant response strategy.

Procedure

After obtaining approval from the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board (#06-0419), school districts, and principals; passive parental consent forms were sent home to parents of all ninth graders in the participating schools. A team of trained research assistants made presentations to students in their classrooms, explaining that the aim of the project was to better understand how and what students their age think about how students get along in schools. Students were informed that the survey was both confidential and anonymous and that they could stop participating at any time. Students with parental permission who agreed to participate signed assent forms prior to completing the survey.

Paper-and-pencil surveys were administered to classes in the schools. Students who raised their hands indicating they were girls were given the female version of the survey to complete; students with the hands down were given the male version of the survey to complete. Trained research assistants were present to administer surveys and answer any questions. The survey took students an average of 25 minutes to complete.

Reliability coding

All open-ended response strategies data were coded by the authors and trained research assistants. Inter-rater reliability was calculated between each pair of coders on 26% of randomly selected surveys. Any disagreements between coders were discussed until consensus was reached. Cohen's kappas ranged from 0.96 to 0.97, indicating high levels of inter-rater agreement.

Table 3. Judgments of social exclusionary bullying scenarios.

| | Character Ethnicity | | |
Excluder	Victim	Mean	Standard Error
White	Black	6.47[a]	0.10
Black	Black	6.39[a]	0.10
White	White	6.40[a]	0.09
Black	White	5.91[b]	0.11

Note. 8-point Likert scale used to rate how good or bad the bullying scenario was with 1 = very, very good and 8 = very, very bad; [a,b]: Scenarios with superscript "a" do not differ significantly from one another, but differ significantly from scenario with superscript "b", ($p < 0.001$).

Results

Scenario judgment findings

First, to assess participants' judgments of the social exclusion scenarios, a 2 (participant gender: male, female) x 2 (participant race: Black, White) x 4 (scenario racial context: White excluder/Black victim; Black excluder/Black victim; White excluder/White victim; Black excluder/White victim) repeated measures (on the last variable) Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted. Below, we highlight the significant effects.

Of particular note, we did not find support for our first hypothesis. There were no main or interaction effects by the race of the participant. Two main effects did emerge involving gender (F (1, 207) = 11.73, $p < 0.001$, η_p^2 = 0.05) and scenario racial context (F (3, 621) = 14.17, $p < 0.001$, η_p^2 = 0.06). Specifically, in support of hypothesis two, female participants rated all of the scenarios as more wrong ($M = 6.53$, $SE = 0.11$) than did male participants ($M = 6.06$, $SE = 0.11$). Follow-up analyses for the main effect of scenario racial context were conducted using pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni adjustments. In support of hypothesis three, the findings revealed that the scenario in which the excluder was Black and the victim was White was judged to be significantly *less* wrong than all of the other scenarios (see Table 3 for *Ms* and *SEs*). No other main or interaction effects emerged as significant.

Response strategy findings

To test the prediction that participant and racial context of the scenario would relate significantly to participant response strategies, a 2 (participant race: Black, White) x 2 (participant gender: male, female) x 4 (scenario racial context: White excluder/Black victim; Black excluder/Black victim; White excluder/White victim; Black excluder/White victim) x 4 (response strategy: aggressive, assertive, adult assistance-seeking, avoidant) repeated measures ANOVA was conducted. Racial context of the scenarios and response strategy were within-subjects factors.

Although we did not have a specific hypothesis for response strategy alone, a significant main effect for response strategy ($F(3, 594) = 41.74$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.17$) emerged. Follow-up analyses were conducted using pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni adjustments. The results revealed that the assertive response was selected significantly more often than the three other potential responses ($ps < 0.001$; see Table 4 for all *Ms* and *SEs*), whereas the adult assistance-seeking response was selected significantly less often than the three other responses ($ps < 0.001$). The rates of selecting aggressive and avoidant responses did not differ significantly from one another.

Although the main effect for response strategy revealed overall differences in the selection of the different responses strategies, this finding was not related to participant race (there were no main or interaction effects by participant race), but did differ based on racial context of the scenario ($F(9, 1782) = 6.46$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$) and on gender ($F(3, 594) = 7.79$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$).

Table 4. Rates of response strategy selection.

Response Type	Overall		Sce. 1		Sce. 2		Sce. 3		Sce. 4	
	Mean	Standard Error (SE)	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE
Aggressive	0.17[a]	0.02	0.20	0.03	0.16	0.03	0.17	0.03	0.14	0.03
Assertive	0.39[b]	0.02	0.44	0.04	0.38	0.04	0.46	0.04	0.27	0.03
Adult assistance	0.05[c]	0.01	0.04	0.02	0.05	0.02	0.06	0.02	0.04	0.02
Avoidant	0.25[a]	0.02	0.19	0.03	0.28	0.03	0.19	0.03	0.36	0.04

Note. Scenario (Sce.) 1: White Excluder, Black Victim; Sce. 2: Black Excluder, Black Victim; Sce. 3: White Excluder, White Victim; Sce. 4: Black Excluder, White Victim.

Response selection by gender

An independent samples t-test was conducted to probe the response strategy by gender interaction. In partial support of hypothesis two, there was a significant difference in selection of aggressive response strategies between boys and girls ($t(200) = -4.89$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.67$); boys ($M = 1.03$, $SD = 1.35$) selected aggressive response strategies significantly more often than did girls ($M = 0.25$, $SD = 0.67$). There were no other significant gender differences in response strategies selected by participants. Thus, we did not find support for hypothesis two in that girls were no more likely to select positive prosocial responses than were boys.

Response selection by scenario racial context

To explore the use of each response strategy across the scenarios–a finding reflective of our third, exploratory hypothesis–follow-up univariate ANOVAs were run separately for each scenario with repeated measures on response strategy. Follow-up analyses revealed that the selection of neither the aggressive response strategy ($F(3, 603) = 2.45$, $p = $ n.s.) nor the adult-assistance response strategy ($F(3, 603) = 0.726$, $p = $ n.s.) differed significantly by the racial context of the scenario.

The selection of assertive ($F(3, 603) = 7.79$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$) and avoidant ($F(3, 603) = 10.693$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.052$) response strategies, however, did differ significantly by scenario racial context. Specifically, assertive response strategies were selected significantly more often in scenarios in which the excluder was White—both with a White victim ($p < 0.01$, scenario 3) and with an Black victim ($p < 0.001$, scenario 1)—than in the scenario in which the excluder was Black and the victim was White (scenario four; see Table 4 for all *Ms* and *SEs*).

In contrast, avoidant response strategies were selected significantly more often in scenarios with Black excluders than those with White excluders. Avoidant responses were selected significantly more in the scenario in which the excluder and victim were both Black (scenario two) than when the excluder was White and the victim was either Black (scenario one: $p < 0.05$, $SE = 0.04$) or White (scenario three: $p < 0.05$, $SE = 0.03$). Likewise, avoidant response strategies were selected significantly more in the scenario in which the excluder was Black and the victim was White (scenario four) than either White excluder scenario (scenario one: $p < 0.001$; scenario three: $p < 0.001$; see Table 4 for all *Ms* and *SEs*).

Discussion

Given the staggering rates of peer victimization in schools and the consequences of such experiences, examination of victims' strategies in response, particularly in the context of interracial social exclusionary bullying which is uniquely consequential and understudied, was warranted. Contributing to the foundation of this literature, the goal of this study was to investigate the role of race in participants' responses to bullying using social exclusion in same- and cross-race peer dyads. Surprisingly, the study found that, in contrast to hypothesis one, there were no significant findings by ethnicity of participant, and response selection did not differ depending on the race of the participant. The study's key findings pertained to (a) gender effects (b) overall

selection of response strategies, and (c) the influence of character race on participant evaluations of and responses to social exclusion. In concordance with hypothesis 2, it was found that (1) boys were more likely than girls to select aggressive responses than girls, and in concordance with hypothesis three, it was found that (2) adolescents selected assertive responses most frequently and adult-assistance responses least frequently; and (3) adolescents were more likely to select assertive responses in situations with White excluders and avoidant responses in situations with Black excluders.

Response strategy selection

The most common response strategy selected by participants—regardless of character race or participants' own race or gender—was the assertive response. This finding is promising given the benefits associated with responding prosocially to bullying scenarios (Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2011). However, the significantly infrequent use of the adult assistance-seeking response warrants further investigation. According to the perspective of many teachers, "telling a teacher or parent" in response to victimization is considered to be one of the most effective strategies (Nicolaides et al., 2002; Spears et al., 2015), indicating a significant disconnect between adolescent students and school staff about how one should and will respond to bullying. Still, one previous study with early adolescents has shown that students rate teacher intervention in bullying situations to be effective, suggesting that some adolescents might recognize the benefit of adult assistance (Crothers et al., 2006). The discrepancy between *perceived benefit* of adult intervention and *actual reliance* on this intervention could be indicative of adolescents' reticence to rely on adult assistance as victims in social exclusion scenarios, whether for fear of social repercussions (Boulton et al., 2017; Dirks et al., 2017), due to experiences of inequitable (disciplinary) treatment by school officials (Brenick et al., 2020), because they perceive their school to be tolerant of bullying (deLara, 2012), or due to a burgeoning desire for adolescents' autonomy in peer interactions (Morris et al., 2021).

Given that advice-seeking, be it from peers or adults such as parents or teachers, has been shown to mitigate internalizing behaviors associated with victimization and has been indirectly linked to the prevention of future victimization (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004), perceptions of school climate as tolerant of bullying and peers as disapproving of reporting behavior and accepting of intergroup discrimination (Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017) are detrimental to bullying prevention efforts, particularly for cross-race bullying. Furthermore, schools in which you find disciplinary responses to problematic behaviors are discrepant by race, also have more negative school climate, overall (Bottiani et al., 2017). These barriers to victim reports of bullying might be mitigated by school programming that emphasizes school policies of intolerance of bullying and encourages adults' active participation in bullying intervention and prevention efforts in a manner sensitive to the social complexities of adolescence and the larger school structures that influence their development and provide the context in which these peer-to-peer interactions occur.

Racial context of scenario

Our scenarios explored how adolescents make sense of exclusion within contexts of societally defined racial asymmetries. The most novel findings emerged when examining the impact of character race on participants' judgments of and responses to social exclusion bullying, suggesting that societal and peer beliefs, both implicit and explicit, about social hierarchy and group stereotypes may influence the responses deemed appropriate in given racial contexts, regardless of participant race. For instance, the scenario in which the excluder was Black and the victim was White was judged as significantly less wrong than all other scenarios. This judgment could reflect a variety of factors given White adolescents' historic discrimination against Blacks. On the one hand, there could be a misperception that White adolescents should not ask a Black adolescent to join their activity in the first place. On the other hand, there could be an

acceptance that Black adolescents' social exclusion of White adolescents is understandable or even acceptable due to the longstanding systemic and interpersonal harm Black youth have experienced (Inman et al., 1998).

Further, participants selected avoidant responses significantly more often for scenarios in which the excluder was Black, potentially indicating a perception that Black excluders are more of a threat to be avoided than their White counterparts. In comparison, participants selected assertive responses significantly more often in scenarios with a White excluder than with an Black excluder and a White victim, again potentially implying that standing up to a White excluder is less threatening and/or more justified than standing up to an Black excluder, especially as a White victim.

Surprisingly, there were no ingroup/outgroup effects that emerged via interactions between participant race and the racial context of the scenarios. It is possible that this may be a function of the data being collected in a large, racially diverse Mid-Atlantic metropolitan area of the United States. If participants from more homogeneous schools were sampled, ingroup/outgroup effects may have emerged more prominently. Students from heterogeneous schools are more likely to have opportunities for cross-race interactions throughout their development and to be exposed to more inclusive school norms (Rivas-Drake et al., 2019).

These findings suggest the need for future studies to examine whether response strategies may be differentially adaptive depending on racial context, or whether they are selected based on other factors, such as stereotypic assumptions (e.g., Inman et al., 1998). Systemic variables such as school demographics, diversity, equity, and inclusion school norms (Brenick et al., 2020; Rivas-Drake et al., 2019), and individual variables such as personal experiences of victimization (SEB, general, race-related) and level of intergroup contact should also be assessed in future research. In addition, future research needs to examine whether and how response strategy adaptations, in connection with these intersecting factors, result in healthier outcomes for adolescents. These findings indicate there is a need for bullying prevention and intervention programs to explicitly address complex intergroup dynamics and incorporate more intergroup examples into their curricula.

Gender effects

The current study found that whereas girls and boys differed in their judgments of the social exclusion scenarios—with females rating the scenarios as more wrong than males—male and female participants generally did not differ in their selection of response strategies with the exception of their selection of aggressive response strategies. Consistent with previous literature which indicates that males tend to enact physical and overt verbal aggression more often than females (Card et al., 2008), male participants were significantly more likely than females to select an aggressive response strategy. Because of the overall infrequency of aggressive response selections in the current study, however, physically, verbally, and relationally aggressive response strategies were collapsed into a single "aggressive" response type. Thus, no gender differences in these aggression subcategories could be examined. Future studies should target populations with higher rates of aggressive behavior or enroll a significantly larger sample to allow for subgroup comparisons to examine whether these gender patterns still apply to each distinct form of aggression.

The findings of the current study also suggest that educational efforts aimed at encouraging adolescents to enact prosocial, assertive responses to bullying likely need not be gender-specific, but rather can treat male and female adolescents similarly because of their comparable endorsement of assertive responses. Future studies should examine whether efforts to reduce aggressive responses, though, might benefit from gender-specific interventions.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study was a first attempt to examine the complex relation between victim response strategies to bullying via social exclusion, racial context, and gender amongst a sample of Black and White

U.S. American adolescents. It was designed to examine adolescents' moral judgments of and response strategies in bullying situations that involve social exclusion in different intra- and interracial contexts. There are many other facets of this topic that still need to be examined in order to fully understand it and determine the best ways of implementing this information to improve bullying prevention and intervention programs.

In the current study, the adult assistance-seeking strategy was selected infrequently, but whether adolescents might have sought help from *peers* was not investigated. Given the increasing salience of peer relations in adolescence (see Laursen & Veenstra, 2021), this could be a fruitful future avenue of inquiry. Relatedly, the wording of the presented adult assistance-seeking strategy, *"Tell the teacher,"* may have been interpreted as "tattling" and thereby unintentionally dissuaded some participants from choosing this strategy. Future studies should offer students alternate adult assistance-seeking strategies as well as responses that involve turning to peers for support.

Further, because the current study did not assess participants' perceptions of bullying in schools, it is difficult to determine what factors motivated participants' selection, or lack thereof, of the adult assistance-seeking response strategy. Thus, future studies should examine the factors contributing to underutilization of the adult assistance-seeking response, including whether or not the racial context of a bullying dyad impacts victims or bystanders' views on the likelihood and efficacy of potential adult interventions. It also remains to be seen whether teachers' and other adults' responses to bullying scenarios might be affected by their own races and the racial makeup of those involved in the bullying scenario.

Additionally, the current study included only two of the many racial groups in the United States. Future research needs to include participants representing other racial and minoritized groups to explore potential differences in moral judgments of and response strategies to bullying in non-white and non-Black racial groups. Similarly, the current findings, based on exclusion scenarios involving White and Black characters, may not generalize to other racial contexts that entail varying societal and historical context. This is also related to the methodological limitation of the current study–each scenario was linked with a specific racial makeup of excluder and victim. Though we assessed the potential confounding of these variables, future studies should explore new social contexts of SEB and vary the racial makeup of the scenario actors, when possible. Thus, depictions of varied social exclusion scenarios in which characters of other races are presented and randomized would be beneficial for advancing the field.

One of the main goals of the study was to broadly examine less explicit racial bias in social exclusion bullying situations. Highlighting the race of the character in the story description by including four versions of each scenario would have potentially made the survey a measure of explicit bias as opposed to allowing for the nuanced consideration that not all cross-race exclusion scenarios is necessarily race-based exclusion (see Thijs, 2017). Therefore, in keeping with implicit bias research practices (see McGlothlin & Killen, 2006), the survey only presented the racial composition of the characters visually—no written mention was made of the races of the characters in the scenarios. Participants were left to determine whether or not the SEB was cross-race or race-based. However, further complicating the matter are findings by Brenick et al. (2012) that indicate ambiguous situations of social exclusion are perceived as discriminatory by minoritized youth, which would likely influence response strategies (see Inman et al., 1998). Future research could employ other implicit bias methods in order to further tease apart how racial composition of excluder/victim dyads affects responses to social exclusionary bullying in intergroup contexts and if perceived discrimination within the scenario would influence the response strategy (e.g., Inman et al., 1998).

Additionally, participants in the current study were asked to provide the response they would take if they were the victim in the social exclusion scenario, not if they were a bystander observing the interaction. Although there are similarities between victim and bystander experiences when faced with the challenge of responding to a victimization situation, for instance, both would need to know how to intervene in a bullying situation and have to take action, it is questionable (to varying degrees) if victims, like bystanders, have also to notice the

bullying event, interpret the situation as problematic and requiring intervention, and accept responsibility for intervening–essential components of bystander intervention models (see Casey et al., 2017; Fredrick et al., 2020). Furthermore, bystander responses can be influenced by many things beyond what victim responses alone may be. For instance, bystanders may be friends with the victim or excluder, they may fear for their own victimization, or could have been a victim themself. It is important to examine the role of racial context in adolescents' bystander interventions as well. Future research should investigate the role of racial context in youth victim and bystander responses (as independent constructs), particularly as the responses relate to their attributions of intentions by the excluders, judgments of the scenarios as right or wrong, and, from these evaluations, determining what, if any, response is warranted.

The current study, a novel investigation into the relation of racial context to adolescents' judgments about and responses to hypothetical situations of bullying using social peer exclusion, not only offers new avenues for research inquiry, but also provides a more comprehensive understanding of the importance of intergroup relations in situations of bullying (see Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017). The present findings and future research will better inform bullying prevention and intervention efforts with minoritized and non-minoritized adolescent populations.

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Author contributions

AB conceptualized the study presented in this paper, assisted in the collecting of data and data entry, drafted all parts of the manuscript, guided, helped, run, and interpreted the results, conducted finishing edits, and oversaw all aspects of manuscript submission. NGM conceptualized the full study from which these data are drawn from and carried out all data collection, entry, and coded at the initial stage, she helped to draft parts of the manuscript, she was instrumental in editing the manuscript. The authors AB and NGM share first-authorship because of the instrumental role NGM played in the broader conceptualization of the study from which these data are

taken, whereas AB conceptualized the study presented in this manuscript. MCK helped conceptualize the study, collect data, run analyses, and edited all parts of the manuscript.

Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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