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Published online: 17 Apr 2013.

To cite this article: Marie-Louise Mares & Michael T. Braun (2013): Effects of Conflict in Tween Sitcoms on US Students' Moral Reasoning About Social Exclusion, Journal of Children and Media, DOI:10.1080/17482798.2013.785972

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2013.785972

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EFFECTS OF CONFLICT IN TWEEN SITCOMS ON US STUDENTS’ MORAL REASONING ABOUT SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Marie-Louise Mares and Michael T. Braun

Fifth graders (N = 97) were randomly assigned to watch one of four episodes of a tween sitcom that varied in the amount of peer conflict depicted (high vs. low; two exemplars at each level). They then responded to vignettes in which a group of students from one social crowd was considering whether to let a student from a different crowd join their team for a school competition. Those in the high-conflict condition were more likely to appeal to group functioning as a reason to exclude; such appeals, in turn, predicted stronger endorsement of exclusion. Habitual exposure to tween programming was significantly associated with endorsement of exclusion for girls, but not for boys, a finding consistent with prior research on social aggression.

KEYWORDS adolescence; peer norms; school; social interaction; social aggression; television

Research and theorizing over the past 10 years have helped describe the role of media content in children’s tendency to engage in nonphysical acts of hostility. This paper seeks to add to that literature by considering whether popular television depictions of teen peer relationships shape young viewers’ judgments about the morality of social exclusion.

To examine these issues, we conducted an experiment. Fifth grade students (~10 year olds) approaching the transition to middle school watched either conflict-laden episodes of popular sitcoms set in school, or relatively low-conflict episodes. Afterwards, we assessed whether their viewing condition, interpretations of the content, and habitual exposure to such programs predicted their judgments about the probability and morality of social-crowd-based exclusion of peers in middle school.

Peer Relationships in Tween TV

Our interest in this topic was prompted in part by the proliferation in the US of “teen scene” TV programs and films depicting adolescent peer relationships against the background of school life. As described by various industry analysts (Romano 2004, 2008), such depictions are typically not designed for high school students themselves, but rather as aspirational viewing for tween audiences (8 to 12 year olds in some industry accounts; 9 to 14 year olds in others, Levin, 2007). The immense appeal of this content for young viewers is suggested both by the (literally) millions of 6 to 11 year olds who watched High School Musical and its sequels on The Disney Channel (Romano 2008) and by the plethora of programs that have aired on Disney, Nickelodeon, and broadcast channels.

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Content analyses of these and other programs that are popular with tween audiences suggest two key points that are worth highlighting. The first is that tween TV programs and films often emphasize prototypical school crowds. In their study of female characters in Nickelodeon and Disney tween sitcoms, Northup & Liebler (2010) reported that girls tended to be physically type-cast into groups such as “valley girl,” “girl next door,” “brainy” and “goth/alternative.” Similarly, Kavaney (2006) wrote about the “anthropology shot” in film and television depictions of high school, in which the camera pans across tables of students in the lunchroom to emphasize divisions between social crowds.

The second key point is that the plot and humor of such programs often highlight and exaggerate the degree of conflict between these groups and the prevalence of interpersonal hostility. Martins & Wilson (2012a) analyzed the top 50 programs watched by 2–11 year olds in the United States, a subset of which were tween sitcoms of the type being considered here (e.g., Hannah Montana, Drake and Josh, Zoey 101, Unfabulous, and That’s So Raven). They reported that 92 per cent of programs contained nonphysical, social aggression (e.g., gossiping, ignoring, laughing derisively, insulting someone), with an average of slightly over 14 such acts per hour. Female characters were more socially aggressive than male characters, typically in a humorous context, and typically without any negative consequences. (See Coyne & Archer 2004 for similar findings in the UK.) Most recently, Gerding and Signorielli (2012) reported that over 80 per cent of 30 “teen scene” programs targeted at tween audiences in the US featured physical violence, the majority of which was presented as humorous. Female characters in those shows were twice as likely as males to be the target of comments (often derogatory) about their physical appearance.

Our point is not to argue that tween TV programs are the only genre that depict interpersonal hostility, nor that they depict the most hostility of all. Rather, the key question is whether prevalent representations of teen life in school as featuring insults, teasing, physical aggression, and other negative encounters between social crowds shape young viewers’ beliefs about what is typical and what is morally acceptable in school.

Prior Research on Effects

Prior research related to this topic has focused on the effects of media content on indirect, relational, and social aggression, three overlapping though conceptually distinct forms of nonphysical hostility. Indirect aggression involves covert acts such as spreading rumors about someone or damaging their possessions (Lagerspetz, Bjorkvist, & Peltonen, 1988). Relational aggression focuses on damaging the victim’s social standing by either direct or indirect manipulative acts, such as gossiping, spreading rumors, or exclusion (Crick 1996). Social aggression ( Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Gariepy, 1989; Galen & Underwood 1997) includes an even broader array of behaviors, such as direct verbal attacks, indirect manipulation, or hostile nonverbal cues. All three share the emphasis on inflicting harm to the victim’s social standing rather than causing physical pain.

Research has examined the relationships between self-selected exposure to TV content containing such forms of aggression and viewers’ own behaviors. In the US, Linder & Gentile (2009) found that teachers’ reports of fifth grade girls’ levels of indirect and verbal aggression were predicted by the frequency with which such behaviors appeared in each girl’s favorite television programs. Martins & Wilson (2012b) surveyed US children in grades K through 5 and found that girls’ (but not boys’) exposure to social aggression on television predicted their self-reported tendency to engage in such behaviors in school. Coyne &
Archer (2005) surveyed 11–14 year olds in England and found that the levels of indirect aggression in each student’s favorite television programs predicted the number of classmates who nominated that student as engaging in indirect aggression when angered (see also Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2004 for experimental findings).

All three sets of researchers (e.g., Coyne & Archer 2005, Linder & Gentile 2009; Martins & Wilson 2012b) have explained these effects in terms of Huesmann’s Information Processing theory (Bushman & Huesmann 2001). Specifically, they suggested that young viewers acquire negative scripts for social behaviors by observing televised models of interpersonal hostility. These scripts then alter appraisals of related situations and guide behavior.

In the first explicit test of such processes, Gentile, Coyne, and Walsh (2011) followed 430 third and fifth grade students over a 6-month period and found that media violence exposure significantly predicted children’s tendency to make hostile attributions about ambiguous relational and physical scenarios. Moreover, boys’ hostile attribution biases about physical scenarios mediated their increases in physical aggression over the 6 months of the study; girls’ hostile attributions about relational scenarios mediated their increases in relational aggression.

Like our fellow researchers in this area, we argue (based on Anderson & Bushman’s 2002, General Aggression Model) that televised depictions of hostile school interactions may contribute to and prime viewers’ scripts about how groups interact in school (Mares & Braun, 2012). In the current paper, we propose that these scripts may not only affect attribution styles, but may also affect moral reasoning about exclusion, and that they may do so by heightening concerns about group norms and dynamics.

**Why Exclusion in Particular?**

We focus here on exclusion for several reasons. First, research suggests that group membership is particularly salient, and exclusion is particularly painful, in the pre-teen and adolescent years (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer 1998; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2007). Brown, Mory, and Kinney (1994) have suggested that school crowds become particularly important in early adolescence in part because they provide a structure for negotiating social relationships in the context of various changes, such as the transition to middle school and increasing interest in heterosocial relationships. In several experiments, both self-report data and brain imaging suggest heightened sensitivity to rejection in early adolescence (Masten et al., 2009, 2011; O’Brien & Bierman 1988; Sebastian, Viding, Williams, & Blakemore, 2010). Most importantly, various studies point to long-term affective consequences of adolescents feeling excluded or rejected by peers (e.g., Lev-Wiesel, Nuttman-Shwartz, & Sternberg, 2006; Prinstein, Sheah, & Guyer, 2005).

In addition, focusing on children’s reasoning about exclusion offers the opportunity to unite the current wave of media effects research on nonphysical aggression with another line of research and theorizing on the development of group relationships. We examine the predictions afforded by the Social Reasoning Developmental Perspective to explore other processes by which media content may contribute to negative peer relationships in school.

**Social Reasoning Developmental Perspective**

Rutland, Killen, and Abrams (2010) recently proposed the Social Reasoning Developmental Perspective, in which they outlined the parallel development of (and tensions
between) moral reasoning and identification with social groups. According to this model, children's decisions about when and why it is appropriate to exclude others or deny them resources are influenced by potentially competing considerations from both of these domains.

The research upon which this model is based suggests that children learn as early as the preschool years that it is unfair and hurtful, and therefore wrong, to exclude others based on demographic characteristics such as race or gender (Killen, Pisacane, Lee-Kim, & Ardila-Rey, 2001; Theimer, Killen, & Stangor, 2001). That is, the basic moral principles of equity/rights and welfare appear to be acquired rather early and are typically applied when the situation is fairly simple (e.g., we won't let you in because you're a girl). However, the research also suggests that children and adolescents may nonetheless choose to exclude when the situation is more complex. For example, children are more likely to consider exclusion from a group to be acceptable when there are rival candidates and a limited number of spaces in the group (Killen & Stangor 2001); when the judgment relates to group participation rather than the allocation of finite, valuable resources such as scholarships (Horn 2003); and when the groups being considered are defined in terms of social crowds rather than the highly sensitive categories of race and ethnicity (Horn 2003, 2006; Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlothlin, & Stangor, 2002; Killen & Stangor 2001). In such situations, other considerations beside moral principles of equity, welfare, and individual rights sometimes prevail to justify exclusion.

Two such considerations have to do with perceived group norms and group functioning. Social Reasoning Developmental Perspective proposes that, as these interrelated issues become more salient during the early and middle adolescent years (Turiel 1983), tolerance of exclusion increases before eventually decreasing again.

Recent evidence of developmental changes in the importance of group norms comes from a series of studies with grade school children (aged 5–12) by Abrams and his associates (Abrams, Rutland, & Cameron, 2003; Abrams, Rutland, Cameron, & Ferrell, 2007; Abrams, Rutland, Cameron, & Marques, 2003). Across the studies, age was associated with stronger preferences for normative in-group members over nonconformist members and with the perception of stronger preferences among their peers for conformist members (e.g., those who liked the same soccer team as others, or those who only expressed support for the in-group summer camp rather than also expressing positive attitudes toward a rival camp).

This increasing emphasis on compliance with group norms and maintenance of group identity plays out in developmental trajectories of reasoning about exclusion. For example, Killen & Stangor (2001) reported that 13 year olds were more likely than 7 or 10 year olds to consider exclusion acceptable when group functioning might be threatened by letting someone join who did not fit the stereotype of a group member (e.g., a boy joining a ballet club). Moreover, 13 year olds were most likely to explicitly justify their decisions based on the implications for group members' comfort and success.

Similarly, Horn (2003) asked 9th and 11th graders about the acceptability of members of high status social crowds (such as “preppies”) excluding a member of a low status crowd (e.g., a “dirtie”) from school activities such as student council or the basketball team. She reported that ninth graders (i.e., 14 year olds) thought such exclusion less wrong than did 11th graders, and they were more likely to appeal to social conventions, group norms, or group functioning in justifying their answers (see also Horn 2006).

To summarize, Social Reasoning Developmental Perspective suggests that children will generally favor inclusion and typically explain their decision on moral grounds.
However, in some situations, pre-adolescents and early adolescents can be swayed toward more negative evaluations and exclusion, via heightened concern about perceived peer norms and by concern over group functioning. The question of the current study is whether depictions of group conflict in tween programming serve to prime such concerns and thereby promote more positive evaluations of exclusion.

**The Current Study**

To assess the effects of depictions of group hostility, we randomly assigned fifth grade students to see episodes of tween TV programs that were either high or low in conflict between groups. Drawing on the research strategies of Horn (2003, 2006) and Killen (e.g., Killen & Stangor 2001), we then presented participants with one of two short vignettes in which students from one social crowd was considering whether to let someone from a different crowd join their team for a school competition. We asked the participants what they thought the group should decide and to evaluate how wrong it would be if the group decided not to include the would-be member. Participants’ justifications for their answers were coded for moral reasons for inclusion (e.g., empathy, social justice), pragmatic reasons for inclusion, and reasons for exclusion, such as the potential cost to group functioning. To assess perceived norms, we also asked whether real students in those groups would be likely to exclude or include.

Given the prior evidence of associations between viewing and indirect or relational aggression, we hypothesized that,

\[ H1: \quad \text{Those who saw a high-conflict episode, compared to those who saw a low-conflict episode would evaluate exclusion in the vignettes as more acceptable.} \]

In addition, based on the Social Reasoning Developmental Perspective, we hypothesized two indirect paths by which such an effect might occur.

\[ H2: \quad \text{The effect of conflict level on perceived acceptability of exclusion would be mediated by} \]

(a) heightened concerns over group functioning (i.e., that including someone from a different crowd causes difficulties).

(b) increased perceived normativity of exclusion (i.e., beliefs that social crowds seldom include someone from a different group).

Given that content analyses report routinely high levels of verbal and indirect aggression in tween/teen programming (e.g., Martins & Wilson 2012a), we hypothesized parallel effects of habitual exposure to tween programs depicting life in school.

\[ H3: \quad \text{Self-selected exposure to tween programs depicting life in school would be positively associated with perceived acceptability of exclusion.} \]

\[ H4a-b: \quad \text{This relationship would be mediated by appeals to group functioning and perceived normativity of exclusion} \]

Finally, prior research findings are mixed about the role of gender in the relationship between habitual exposure to various forms of nonphysical aggression and viewer enactment of such behaviors. Two studies (Gentile et al., 2011; Martins & Wilson 2012b) found significant relationships only for girls (and a third only examined girls; Linder & Gentile 2009). In contrast, Coyne & Archer (2005) did not find gender differences in their
survey study, nor were there gender differences in their experimental examination of responses to depictions of indirect aggression (Coyne et al., 2004). Given this, we posed the following research question:

RQ1: Are there gender differences in the experimental effects of exposure to conflict and in the strength of the relationship between habitual exposure to tween programming and endorsement of exclusion?

Method

A total of 97 fifth grade students ($M_{\text{age}} = 10.8, SD = .43$) participated during the late spring or summer of 2009. For all of them, this was a period of transition before their first year of middle school. The sample was roughly split by gender (48.5 per cent male). The majority (72 per cent) were White, 10.3 per cent were African American, 3.1 per cent were Latino/a, 6.2 per cent Asian, as indicated by parents on the consent forms. All were fluent in English. Socioeconomic status was not recorded. Participants were recruited via flyers sent home from schools, summer camps, and community programs in a moderately sized Midwestern US city and its surrounding suburbs and villages. Participants came from twenty-two elementary schools and were to attend twenty-two middle schools.

Design

Participants were randomly assigned to watch a tween sitcom episode that was either low or high in social conflict between cliques or school crowds. Within conflict level, they were assigned to see one of two exemplars (one from That’s So Raven; one from Unfabulous) for a total of four viewing conditions with gender balanced in each condition.

Procedure

Students participated individually outside of school hours. They watched the episode on a laptop computer and then the interviewer read out the questions. Students filled out their responses to the close-ended questions; open-ended responses were audio taped for transcription and coding. Sessions were 30 to 60 minutes long. Afterwards, the interviewer thanked the student, offered a $10 gift certificate, and, in the high-conflict conditions, gave the following debriefing, “You know, my sense is that the schools here work really hard to make sure that kids get along. The program you watched really played up conflict because the people who make these sorts of programs think that conflict is interesting to watch. But really, the kids in middle school are just the same sort of kids you’ve known all along. All sorts of people can be friends and can make good choices and that’s not going to change just because you’re going to middle school. Okay?”.

Materials

We chose two situation comedies in which the central protagonists were youths shown in school settings for substantial portions of most episodes. That’s So Raven aired on the Disney Channel and continues to air on other Disney-affiliated networks including ABC.
Unfabulous was in re-runs on Nickelodeon at the time of the study. Both were popular with tween audiences (see Mares, Braun, & Hernandez, 2012 for more detail). From each program, one episode was selected that focused primarily on conflict between social groups in school, and one was selected that showed little group conflict. The episodes were edited to 15 minutes in length by removing sub-plots and shortening the credits.

For increased external validity, we kept the primary narrative of the high-conflict episodes as intact as possible, maintaining the mix of different forms of hostility as aired rather than editing the content to focus specifically on scenes of social exclusion. This allowed us to examine whether “naturally” occurring scenes of physical, verbal, and indirect aggression (i.e., as created by TV producers rather than us) generalized to affect judgments about exclusion.

High-conflict episodes. In the high conflict That’s So Raven episode, (“Run, Raven, Run”; Season 2, Episode 3) Raven and a long-standing enemy (both surrounded by their groups of friends) disagree over who should approach a new boy at school. During a series of comic mishaps, Raven and her best friend spend much of the episode running through school corridors trying to hide from the enemy’s supporters. Toward the end, the conflict momentarily appears to be resolved but then the hostilities break out again. The episode contains both verbal and physical aggression (e.g., punching Raven’s friend in the arm).

In the high conflict Unfabulous episode (“The Rep”; Season 1, Episode 7), students in Addy’s class are assigned to spend a week interacting with members of a social group (e.g., jocks, populars, and AV geeks) with which they do not normally associate. Addy is assigned to a group of popular girls and is tempted into avoiding her best friends who were put in less prestigious groups. She eventually learns that the popular girls do not really like her, and after foiling a plot by one of them to humiliate her friends, rejoins her original circle. The episode contains both direct verbal aggression and indirect aggression.

Low-conflict episodes. Choosing a relevant comparison group is often not a straightforward decision in media research. In the current study, rather than have the comparison group watch nothing at all (resulting in a different experience, with questions about exclusion and school answered much earlier in the interaction with the interviewer), and rather than have them see material from a different genre (which might have introduced other confounds), we had them watch episodes from the same series that focused on other aspects of teen life (e.g., homework, sibling relations). A similar strategy was used by Coyne, Nelson, Robinson, and Gunderson (2011) in their study of adult responses to depictions of ostracism.

In the low conflict That’s So Raven episode (“Blue in the Face”; Season 2, Episode 9) Raven seeks help with a science project from her brother’s friend in return for helping the friend dress better. She does not fulfill her end of the bargain and is left to complete the science project on her own, with various slapstick consequences. In the low conflict, Unfabulous episode (“The Little Sister”; Season 1, Episode 11), Addy feels overshadowed by her older brother’s scholastic and social reputation, but ultimately learns that she has gifts of her own. The low-conflict episodes did not depict peer conflict and did not emphasize social crowds, but neither did they emphasize peer cooperation and friendship.

Pilot test and manipulation check. Forty undergraduates who were unfamiliar with the hypotheses were randomly assigned to watch one of the four episodes used for this
study. Afterwards, they rated how rude, friendly, mean, and nice the students in the episode seemed on a 7-point scale from 0 Not at All to 6 Very. These four items were averaged to create a measure of character hostility (α = .89, positive items reversed). A two-way ANOVA indicated the desired main effect of conflict level on ratings of character hostility: ratings of hostility were significantly higher in the high conflict (M = 5.09, SE = .10) than in the low-conflict condition (M = 2.34, SE = .10) F (1, 36) = 382.42, p < .001. Also as desired, the main effect of program (Unfabulous vs. That’s So Raven) was not significant (p > .20) nor was the interaction (p > .80).

The manipulation check within the study itself involved asking the fifth grade participants to rate the characters using the same items on the same scale (0–6) as above (Cronbach’s α = .83). As with the pilot test, there was a significant main effect of conflict level (see Table 1). The main effect of program was not significant (p > .30) nor was there a significant interaction (p > .50). In addition, participants rated four items related to perceived humor (Episode is funny, humorous; Students are funny, humorous; Cronbach’s α = .85). There were no significant main effects or an interaction effects for ratings of humor (see Table 1 for means by conflict level).

**Measures**

The order of questions in the interviews was constant across viewing conditions. The interviewer asked about the participant’s age, the names of the current and future schools, familiarity with the new school, emotions about going to middle school, perceptions of middle school social climate, responses to a social exclusion vignette, perceptions of the episode, and viewing of specific tween sitcoms. Only the exclusion vignette responses are examined here, together with viewing data and possible covariates. The other outcomes are reported elsewhere (Mares et al., 2012). Descriptive statistics are given in Table 1.
Developing the social exclusion vignettes. Based on information from teachers that the local “book bowl” competition was well known to students in the area and involved decisions about group inclusion (children form teams, read books, and compete to answer questions), we wrote a vignette in which someone wanted to join a book bowl team. Based on interviews with 10 sixth graders, we generated a list of six school crowds. We then gave the list of six crowds to ten fifth graders and asked them to rate how much they knew about each and to indicate two pairs of crowds that did not get along. They then heard the vignette with those pairs inserted and rated whether it made sense that such a scenario could arise and whether there might “be issues.” All rated themselves as familiar with jocks, preppies, skaters, and goths (above 3 on a 5-point scale) and based on the most frequent pairings, we created two versions: a male skater asked to join a team of male jocks and a female goth asked to join a team of female preppies.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two versions, allowing us to test whether the effects of conflict condition would generalize across the different crowd pairings.

Acceptability of exclusion. Based on the strategies of Horn (2003), the interviewer read the vignette out loud, asked what the group members should decide, and then asked, “What if they decide that they won’t let that person in their group? How okay or not okay is that?” (1-Definitely Not Okay to 7-Definitely Okay). Participants were then asked to justify their answers.

Appeals to group function and other reasoning about exclusion. Children’s open-ended justifications were transcribed and subsequently coded for type of moral reasoning by two undergraduates who did not know the hypotheses or the participants’ experimental condition. The coding scheme was based on that used by Horn (2003), though we added reasons for inclusion after reading the transcripts, and we used somewhat different labels to fit with the terms used in our hypotheses. Table 2 shows the coding scheme, examples of participant responses, and coder reliabilities as assessed by Cohen’s Kappa. Participants received a dichotomous score (0-No, 1-Yes) for each type of justification. A participant could have given more than one justification.

Perceived peer norms: likelihood of inclusion. After evaluating the acceptability of exclusion, students were asked, “If these were real kids, how likely is it that they’d let him/her in?”. They gave their responses on a 7-point Likert scale (1-Definitely Not Let In to 7-Definitely Let In).

Prior viewing of tween programs. Students indicated how frequently they watched each of ten programs (“never (0), once/twice (1), occasionally (2), every time or almost every time there’s a new episode (3”)”). All the programs were targeted toward the participants’ age group. All were live action depictions of adolescent peer relationships and all had episodes (often substantial parts of episodes) depicting life in school (iCarly, Unfabulous, Drake and Josh, Hannah Montana, Suite Life of Zack and Cody, That’s So Raven, Zoey 101, Sonny with a Chance, True Jackson VP, and Wizards of Waverly Place). Scores for each program were summed to create a measure of overall exposure, ranging from 0 to 30.
We ran a multivariate analysis of variance on the two continuous outcome variables (perceived probability of inclusion and perceived acceptability of exclusion), and a logistic regression predicting mentions of group functioning as a justification for exclusion. Experimental conflict level and gender were the predictors. Power calculations, using G*Power software (Erdfelder, Faul, & Buchner, 1996), indicated that with 97 participants and \( p < .05 \), power to detect an effect of \( f = .22 \) was .81. This falls within the guidelines for acceptable power to detect a moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988). Initially, we considered whether vignette version and prior knowledge of conflict in the participant’s future middle school would interact with experimental condition, but because there were no significant effects, these variables were dropped.

**Examining the Effects of Experimental Condition**

The result of the multivariate analysis of variance showed the predicted effect of condition Wilks \( \lambda = .865, F(2, 92) = 7.17, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .14 \). There were no effects of gender, either at the multivariate or univariate level, nor did gender interact with experimental condition in the logistic regression.

### TABLE 2
Coding and reliability for students’ reasoning about exclusion vignettes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding and Reason</th>
<th>Reliability Measure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group Functioning As Reason to Exclude</strong></td>
<td>(.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empathy As a Reason to Include</strong></td>
<td>(.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Equality or Justice As a Reason to Include</strong></td>
<td>(.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Right to Choose As Reason to Exclude</strong></td>
<td>(.97)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Note** | Numbers in parentheses are Cohen’s Kappa measures of inter-coder reliability. 

**Results**

**Analytic Strategy**

We ran a multivariate analysis of variance on the two continuous outcome variables (perceived probability of inclusion and perceived acceptability of exclusion), and a logistic regression predicting mentions of group functioning as a justification for exclusion. Experimental conflict level and gender were the predictors. Power calculations, using G*Power software (Erdfelder, Faul, & Buchner, 1996), indicated that with 97 participants and \( p < .05 \), power to detect an effect of \( f = .22 \) was .81. This falls within the guidelines for acceptable power to detect a moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988). Initially, we considered whether vignette version and prior knowledge of conflict in the participant’s future middle school would interact with experimental condition, but because there were no significant effects, these variables were dropped.

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Table 1 shows the differences between experimental conditions (low vs. high depicted conflict) for the three main outcomes and for the manipulation check (perceived character hostility). Overall, students thought that exclusion in the vignettes was relatively unacceptable—the average rating was 2.62 on a 7-point scale where 7 indicated that exclusion was “Definitely Okay”. The hypothesized effect of experimental condition (low vs. high conflict) on perceived acceptability of exclusion was not significant. However, as shown in Table 1, there was the hypothesized effect of conflict condition on perceived peer norms about exclusion, such that those who saw the high-conflict episodes thought it less likely that real preppies or jocks would let a goth or skater join their team. There was also the expected effect of condition on appeals to group functioning as a reason to exclude—49 per cent of those who saw high-conflict episodes made such appeals compared to 21 per cent of those who saw low-conflict episodes.

Table 1 also indicates that there were no significant effects of experimental condition on the frequency with which children mentioned other reasons for exclusion or inclusion. Across conditions, the majority of children appealed to equality and justice as a reason for inclusion. Taken together, the pattern of results support the argument that depicted conflict would operate on perceived acceptability of exclusion by priming concerns about group functioning rather than by altering the additional moral considerations of empathy, justice, and personal choice.

Testing Direct and Indirect Paths to Acceptability of Exclusion

As a more rigorous and efficient test of our hypotheses of a direct path and two indirect paths from exposure to televised conflict to perceived acceptability of exclusion, we conducted path analyses in Mplus 6.1. In Baron and Kenny’s (1986) approach to mediation, the lack of a significant main effect of conflict condition would end attempts to examine explanatory mechanisms. However, more recent statistical theorizing indicates that indirect effects may occur even in the absence of a direct effect, in which case there is not mediation. Rather, there is a two-step process (or, possibly a multi-step process) by which one variable affects another (see Hayes 2009; Shrout & Bolger 2002).

Given that we had a dichotomous mediator, we used MLR (Maximum Likelihood Robust) estimation, which is relatively resilient to violations of the assumptions of normality. Gender was included as a covariate. The path diagram, with standardized estimates, can be seen in Figure 1. The model fit the data fairly well as indicated, in part, by a relatively small, nonsignificant value of chi square, $\chi^2 (2, n = 95) = 1.37$, $p = .50$. (Kenny 2010, argues that Chi square is a reasonable measure of fit for models with 75 – 200 cases.) The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .00 which meets the guidelines that RMSEA $< .05$ for good fit (Browne & Cudek, 1993; Kaplan 2000), though the 90 per cent confidence interval was large (.0 – .15) which Kenny (2010) notes may happen when degrees of freedom and sample size are small. The CFI and TLI were both 1.0, which met the guidelines that they should be larger than .95 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

As shown in Figure 1, the hypothesized direct path from exposure to televised conflict to perceived acceptability of exclusion was not significant. However, there was support for the hypothesized indirect path via increased appeals to group functioning ($\beta = .25, SE = .12, p < .05$). Exposure to high levels of conflict was associated with more appeals to group functioning, and appeals to group functioning were, in turn, associated with higher ratings of the acceptability of exclusion.
We had also hypothesized an indirect effect of exposure to high levels of conflict via decreased perceptions of the probability of real-world inclusiveness in such a scenario. This path was not significant ($p = .69$) as shown in Figure 1, exposure to high levels of conflict was significantly associated with decreased expectations of real-world inclusion, as expected. However, (contrary to our hypothesis) perceptions of the likelihood of inclusion were not significantly related to judgments about how acceptable exclusion would be.

To confirm that differences between conditions were the result of our manipulation and not the result of some other, inadvertent difference, we reran the path analysis, using perceived character hostility (and gender) as the exogenous variables. The results were virtually identical, both in terms of model fit and in terms of the size and significance of coefficients.

Examining Relationships with Habitual Viewing

We hypothesized that students who watched tween programs more frequently would perceive exclusion to be more acceptable, and that this relationship would be explained by the two indirect paths. However, the only significant relationship was between habitual exposure and perceived likelihood of real-world inclusion $\beta = -.38$, $p < .001$. When examined by itself, this relationship remained significant even after controlling for students’ information about conflict in their future school, $r_p (91) = -.34$, $p < .01$ and it did not vary by gender.

Based on RQ1, we examined whether the correlations between habitual tween TV viewing, appeals to group functioning, and judgments about the acceptability of exclusion, differed by gender. Among girls, habitual exposure to tween programs was significantly positively related to ratings of the acceptability of exclusion, $r (49) = .31$, $p < .05$. The hypothesized relationship between habitual exposure and appeals to group functioning as a reason to exclude was not significant, though it was in the expected direction ($r (49) = .24$, $p = .10$). Among boys, the relationships between habitual exposure and reasoning about exclusion or appeals to group functioning were nonsignificant and trivially small.
Discussion

As noted in the introduction, prior research suggests that children generally think it is wrong to use demographic or social group membership as a reason for exclusion. The fifth graders in our study were no exception. Some compared such exclusion to racism or described the possible negative effects on the rejected person’s self-esteem. Most commonly they argued that for jocks to exclude a skater or for preps to exclude a goth violated basic principles of fairness and equality.

Nonetheless, their evaluations of exclusion varied significantly, depending on what television episode they had just seen, though not in a straightforward way. It was not that those who saw scenes of hostility and exclusion simply gave higher ratings of the acceptability of exclusion in direct imitation of the characters’ interpersonal nastiness. Rather, those who saw one of the two high-conflict episodes, featuring interpersonal hostility between groups of students, were more likely to consider group functioning as a possible reason for exclusion in the vignette, and those who raised group functioning as a problem thought exclusion more acceptable. That is, children in both conditions appeared to be focused on moral concerns, but those who saw high-conflict episodes were also swayed by issues related to social relationships. The overall reluctance to exclude, combined with this significant, indirect effect via salience of costs to group functioning, fits with the description of competing considerations, offered by the Social Reasoning Developmental Perspective (Rutland et al., 2010).

Our reading of the Social Reasoning Developmental Perspective also led to a prediction that high-conflict episodes would affect judgments about exclusion by altering perceptions of social norms. That is, we anticipated that those who saw the high-conflict episodes would think it less likely that real jocks or preps would allow a skater or goth to join their team, and that this perception of the normativity of exclusion (measured across the two pairings) would lead them to think it more acceptable. As predicted, those in the high-conflict condition were significantly more pessimistic about real-world inclusion, apparently generalizing from the groups and types of conflict depicted in the episodes to the different social pairings and situation in the vignettes. However, their television-induced judgment that real-world inclusion was relatively unlikely did not make them more tolerant of exclusion.

Why was this latter effect not significant, given earlier findings (Abrams et al., 2007; Rutland, Cameron, Milne, & McGeorge, 2005) that grade school children’s judgments are affected by perceptions of peer norms? One possibility relates to the fact that the main characters in the high-conflict episodes were the victims rather than the perpetrators of relational aggression, and thus the overall message of the episodes was not in favor of exclusion. Participants in the high-conflict conditions might plausibly think that exclusion is frequent but continue to think of it as undesirable. Such interpretations would also help explain the lack of a direct effect of conflict level on judgments about exclusion. Importantly, such views are still compatible with a perception that disparate groups would not function well together, which might justify exclusion from a competitive team.

A related issue is that we only asked about likelihood of exclusion by jocks and populars, both groups which tend to be negatively stereotyped in media depictions (Kaveney 2006). Thinking that these high status crowds are likely to exclude may not reflect a judgment that “everyone” excludes, or that members of one’s own group would probably do so. Further research should examine which referent group norms (similar peers? friends?...
anticipated or desired friends?) are most influential in shaping attitudes toward exclusion and which are influenced by popular media depictions of adolescent lives.

In addition to these experimental effects, we also examined whether habitual exposure to tween programming would predict children’s beliefs and judgments about exclusion. Heavier viewers among both boys and girls thought that real jocks and populars would be relatively unlikely to include a skater or goth. Put in terms of the General Learning Model (Bushman & Anderson, 2002) this is consistent with the argument that viewing hostile content contributes to negative scripts about peer relationships and person schemata.

Habitual exposure to tween programming was also significantly associated with endorsement of exclusion, but only among girls in the sample. This gender difference is consistent with the findings of Martins & Wilson (2012b) and Gentile et al., (2011) but is inconsistent with the findings of Coyne & Archer (2005). Overall, the current findings and the results of earlier studies support the possibility of stronger negative outcomes of habitual exposure to scenes of interpersonal hostility for girls.

Obviously the relationship between self-selected exposure and endorsement of exclusion is not evidence of causality, given that it is entirely plausible that girls who find exclusion more acceptable would also find such programs more appealing. It is somewhat useful to note that the relationship was significant even after controls for having heard about conflict at their future middle school (hence it is less probable that we observed this relationship simply because those who expected hostilities watched the programs more often). In contrast to the experimental effects, we did not find an indirect path via appeals to group functioning. However, the relationship between habitual viewing and such appeals was in the right direction, even if it was not significant, so we leave this as a possible pathway that needs to be reassessed with a larger sample of girls.

The finding of significant effects of experimental exposure to scenes of interpersonal hostility for boys as well as girls is consistent with prior experimental findings (Coyne et al., 2004). Taken together, the results suggest the need to consider further the conditions under which boys are affected by such content, and the possible role of attention as a mediator of effects.

In conclusion, the current study sits at the intersection of two literatures: research on the development of moral reasoning about exclusion, and media effects research on indirect, social, and relational aggression. Despite the study’s limitations, the findings speak to both fields and suggest avenues for further work that involve insights from both. For researchers of children’s moral reasoning about inclusion, the results provide a novel indication of the potential for media content to heighten the salience of group functioning and thereby alter evaluations of exclusion. For media aggression researchers, the indirect effect of group salience suggests an additional route (besides changes in attribution styles) by which children may develop more antisocial interaction styles.

Further research should consider how media effects might vary by the nature of the exclusion situation being considered (rather than simply consider one scenario as we did) and make the developmental comparisons that have been a core focus of research on moral reasoning. In addition, such studies should examine audience members’ identification, engagement, and arousal more closely and include the behavioral measures that have been a strength of recent work on relational aggression. Finally, such measures should expand to include bystander passiveness (i.e., not intervening) rather than focusing
only on the tendency to engage in aggressive acts. Overall, this project suggests the fruitfulness of continuing to work at this intersection.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Preparation of this manuscript was supported in part by a fellowship from The Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS).

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