

Anti-Egalitarians Are Lenient Toward Corporate Misconduct: Mixed Evidence for the Role of Threat and Mind Perception

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Abstract

Although people's ideological beliefs are key to understanding how they make moral judgments, existing research has been silent on how such ideological beliefs drive their psychological perceptions of corporations and their responses to corporate misconduct. Across multiple studies we consistently found that people high in social dominance orientation (SDO) judge organizational transgressions less harshly. These results generalized across organizational size and industry, and they were not explained by political orientation. However, evidence for the mechanism for this relationship, including the role of mind perception and perceived threat, was mixed. We discuss possible reasons for such mixed evidence and the theoretical implications of the findings.

Keywords

social dominance, anthropomorphism, mind perception, corporate misconduct, morality

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Introduction

In 2017, the credit reporting agency Equifax had 140 million social security numbers stolen in a cyber breach. As part of its punishment, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC, 2019) fined the company around U.S.\$125 per person (Law, 2019). This outcome drew polarized responses along ideological lines, with some accepting the decision while others criticized it as too lenient (Marks, 2019; Newman, 2019). Though reasons for the disagreement are likely multifold, we suggest that moral judgments of wrongdoing by an organization—"a collection of people, structured in a specific way to achieve a series of shared goals" (Blau & Scott, 1962; Ouchi, 1980; Tang et al., 2020)—be partly determined by the perceiver's ideology. Specifically, we suggest that people high in social dominance orientation (SDO)—those with anti-egalitarian attitudes—judge organizational wrongdoing less harshly than those low in SDO. We theorize that this is because anti-egalitarians perceive organizations as less capable of agency (low in "agentic mind") than egalitarians, as agentic mind perception invites moral condemnation (Gray et al., 2012, 2014).

Scholars have begun to uncover the contextual factors and cognitive processes which affect moral judgments of organizational misconduct (Jago & Pfeffer, 2018; Schein et al., 2020; Tang & Gray, 2018). Yet despite a large body of work on how ideology affects reactions to individual-level misconduct (Graham et al., 2013; Skitka et al., 2015), the role of ideology in driving moral judgments of

organizations—a structured collection of people pursuing a common goal (Blau & Scott, 1962)—still poorly understood. Given that the ideologies of powerful figures—like judges and congress people—can influence the consequences for wrongdoing organizations, it is important to understand how ideology drives moral judgment. We focus on an ideology that is especially pertinent to organizations: SDO.

SDO (Ho et al., 2015; Sidanius et al., 2016) captures individual differences in peoples' preferences for stratified versus egalitarian social arrangements. That is, people high in SDO are more likely to support ideas and actions that maintain social hierarchy. Such maintenance of social hierarchies may be achieved through group-based dominance, including through organizations. For example, in organizational contexts, individuals high in SDO are more likely to support unequal distributions of organizational resources (Ho et al., 2012) and to seek jobs which strengthen social hierarchies (Sidanius et al., 1996).

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We argue that those high in SDO would be motivated to judge organizational misconduct less harshly than those low in SDO. Existing and related research supports this view. First, organizations share similar conceptual templates as SDO, as they are very often hierarchically based. While SDO promotes societal stratification, organizations are usually hierarchically structured with uneven distributions of resources and the most resources at the top (Halevy et al., 2011). Second, although the goals of some organizations may be to attenuate hierarchy or inequality in society (e.g., nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]), organizations like corporations that we frequently read in the news can serve to maintain and even enhance social hierarchies (Amis et al., 2020; Card et al., 2013; Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015), and perpetuate inequality (Card et al., 2013). It is these hierarchy-enhancing organizations that are the focus of our investigation. These outcomes are consistent with the desire to maintain a social class system in SDO.¹ Finally, people tend to downplay the seriousness of moral wrongs when they can benefit from an unfair process (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002) or when they are able to justify an outcome (Uhlmann et al., 2015). Those high in SDO may use the inherently unfair distribution of resources in a hierarchical corporate structure to justify unfair or morally dubious outcomes.

The relationship between SDO and moral judgments of organizational wrongdoing may be driven by how people perceive the organization's mind. An emerging view of how people judge organizational wrongdoing is based on how people judge the mental capacity of organizations, and corporations in particular (Rai & Diermeier, 2015; Tang & Gray, 2018). Perceived mind refers to the extent to which they perceive any entity as possessing human capacities, such as the ability to strategize and experience unhappiness (Epley et al., 2007; Jago & Laurin, 2017), and it influences how harshly people judge it after wrongdoing. According to this model, mind perception is generally split along two dimensions (Gray et al., 2007)—*agency* (the capacity to do things like planning and communicating) and *experience* (the capacity to feel, such as emoting). Higher agency entails the capacity to take moral responsibility for actions, while higher experience entails the capacity to suffer victimization or to feel contrite.

Though people tend to perceive humans as possessing both capacities, they tend to perceive organizations as high in agency but low in experience (Rai & Diermeier, 2015). This pattern of mind perception means that organizations are perceived as more capable of perpetrating harm and taking responsibility, but less capable of feeling suffering and being victimized (Gray & Wegner, 2009; Schein & Gray, 2018; Waytz et al., 2010b). As a result, people are angrier at wrongdoing organizations and desire more punishment compared with wrongdoing individuals (Rai & Diermeier, 2015). On the contrary, when organizations are seen as more experiential, people more easily forgive them (Tang & Gray, 2018). Based on past research (Schein &

Gray, 2018), however, we suggest that in addition to *increasing* experience, factors *reducing* perceived organizational agency can also reduce moral blame, such as SDO.

There is reason to believe that, based on existing work showing a link between agency and perceived threat, people high (vs. low) in SDO are more likely to perceive a weaker agentic organizational mind. Past research has shown that when people see an entity as threatening, it is because they see it as high in agency but low in experience (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014), such that the entity is competent and goal oriented while also being unfriendly. Recent work demonstrates the central role threat plays in mind perceptions toward groups. Formanowicz et al. (2023) found that the more distant a highly agentic group is (e.g., people in a village elsewhere in the world, rather than people approaching the border of one's country), the less the group is seen as a threat. Formanowicz et al. (2023) theorized that social dominance motives contribute to this relationship, such that those higher in SDO are more sensitive to the perceived threat of migrants at the border, which in turn engenders greater agency attributions. Since people do attribute agentic mental capacity to organizations (Rai & Diermeier, 2015), we reasoned that those high in SDO would be less likely to attribute agency to an organization because they see them as hierarchy-maintaining and less of a threat to the social order (though, to preempt our findings, we ultimately do not find support for this prediction).

Given the connections between theories of social dominance and dyadic morality, we theorized that those high (vs. low) in SDO would judge organization wrongdoing less harshly because they attribute less mental agency (a basic cognitive process of SDO's attention to perceived threats) to organizations (Figure 1). As we reveal below, however, we find consistent evidence for the relationship between SDO and more lenient moral judgment, but not for an underlying mechanism. We find mixed evidence for the proposed mechanism of agency, and tentative evidence for the role of threat, in the SDO–moral judgment relationship. We also do not find support for the hypothesis that those high in SDO attribute lower agency to organizations in contexts without moral violations.

We tested our model across four studies. Study 1 investigated the link between SDO and moral judgment, controlling for political orientation as an alternative explanation (Jasinenko et al., 2020). Study 2 examined the entire model. Study 3 examined the SDO–agency relationship in a context lacking a moral transgression, along with a measure of general threat, while Study 4 did so in a context with a moral transgression along with the role of perceived proximal threat. We varied whether a moral transgression was present to specifically examine the underlying mechanism, as one explanation for the SDO–agency relationship may be due to a more basic cognitive process where those high in SDO attribute less mental states to organizations or group-targets in general, rather than as a motivated response to organizational misconduct specifically.

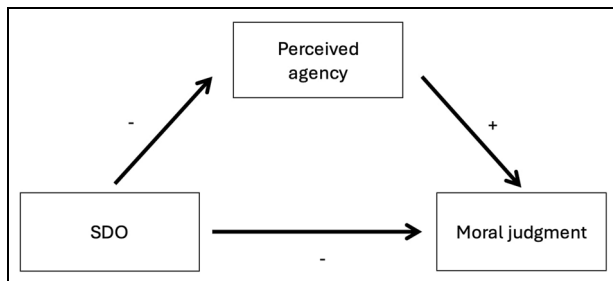


Figure 1. Original Theoretical Model of SDO, Mind Perception, and Moral Judgment

Note. High (vs. low) SDO reduces perceived organizational agency, which reduces harsh moral judgment for wrongdoing.

Open Science

In the interest of open science and scientific inquiry, we include the representative studies that show mixed support for our model in the article. We also elected to present the mixed results because they were revealed during the review process where attempts to directly replicate originally observed results were met with mixed success. We believe that it is important to be transparent about our theoretical reasoning, both original and updated, in light of the new findings, and that our current results suggest that the explanatory power of mind perception for SDO on moral judgments may be limited. We hope that this research is a first step in understanding how ideology influences moral judgments of organizations and that future research can further refine the model.

We report all our studies here or in the SOM. In the interest of article length, we report two large, preregistered studies that examine our proposed mechanism: one supporting our model (Study 2, a replication of Supplemental Study 3) and another that does not (Study 4). We also include a study that is a failed attempt to replicate a previously observed finding (Study 3, trying to replicate Supplemental Study 2). The SOM includes two other studies included in the original article; both supporting the model. Table 1 summarizes the studies.

All data, analysis scripts, and survey materials (with data coding embedded within) associated with this article are publicly available on the Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/muj54/>. The lead author prepared all open materials.

Study 1

Method

Study 1 tested whether those high (vs. low) in SDO would judge hierarchy-enhancing organizational wrongdoing more leniently. To generalize our findings, we sampled different organization types and kinds of transgressions. Furthermore, Study 1 examined political orientation as an alternative explanation.

Study 1 utilized a within-subjects, repeated measures design. A power analysis found that 121 participants were needed to detect a small effect size ($f = 0.10$) within a 1×5 repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) design with 80% power. We decided to recruit 135 participants *a priori* to account for participants who might fail the comprehension check. In total, 136 participants completed the 5-minute study on Amazon's TurkPrime platform for U.S.\$ 0.85. Nine participants failed the comprehension check, leaving a final $N = 127$ (635 data points in total). Including these nine excluded participants in the final analyses does not meaningfully change the results and increases the SDO–immorality relationship (p values remain $< .001$).

After providing informed consent participants read, in randomized order, five vignettes detailing different instances of corporate misconduct (e.g., “Champion Transportation is a large transportation company which operates in 15 states to transport finished consumer goods to several box store chains. Regulators have recently discovered that Champion Transportation was knowingly transporting counterfeit products, which have since been traced to sweat-shop labor.”). To measure moral judgment, participants completed a three-item measure indicating how “immoral,” “wrong,” and “ethical” (reverse-coded) the organization's actions were ($\alpha = .85$) on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*).² Participants subsequently completed a comprehension check asking them to identify the correct “subject” of the scenarios they read (organizations) out of other incorrect answers (e.g., animals and political candidates).

To measure political orientation, we gave participants a single-item measure of liberalism-conservatism from 1 (*very liberal*) to 7 (*very conservative*). Finally, participants completed the 16-item SDO₇ scale ($\alpha = .96$), basic demographic questions, and read a debrief that made clear that the vignettes were fictional.

Results

We tested our hypotheses using linear mixed-effects regressions with random intercepts modeled for participant (to control for repeated measures) and a fixed effect controlling for vignette (effects coded). We tested three models with moral judgments as the dependent variable (DV) and vignettes as a control variable. In the first and second models, we entered SDO and political orientation separately as the independent variable (IV). In the third model, we entered both SDO and political orientation to account for the possibility that our results were driven by political preferences rather than SDO.

We found that the higher someone was on SDO, the less immoral they perceived the organization to have behaved (Model 1). Political orientation was not associated with moral judgments at baseline (Model 2), although conservatives were more likely to judge organizational wrongdoing

Table 1. Overview of Studies

Study title	Primary finding	Replication/relation to other studies	Preregistration
Study 1	High SDO predictive of more lenient judgments of organizational wrongdoing	Conducted as follow-up to Supplemental Study 1	None
Study 2	The SDO–moral judgment relationship observed in Study 1 was mediated by low perceived organizational agency	A successful replication of Supplemental Study 3	https://osf.io/2wu34/
Study 3	SDO uncorrelated with organizational agency in morally neutral contexts. Threat uncorrelated with SDO. High feelings of threat correlated with low perceived organizational agency	An unsuccessful replication of Supplemental Study 2	https://osf.io/c627w/
Study 4	High SDO predictive of less feelings of threat. SDO and agency uncorrelated. Agency and threat uncorrelated	Conducted as a follow-up to Study 3	https://osf.io/8b7e9/
Supplemental Study 1	High SDO predictive of low perceived organizational agency for organizations engaging in misconduct	Part of the original set of studies	None
Supplemental Study 2	High SDO predictive of high perceived organizational agency in morally neutral contexts	Part of the original set of studies. Failed to replicate in Study 3	None
Supplemental Study 3	High SDO is predictive of more lenient judgments of organizational wrongdoing because those high in SDO attribute less agentic mind to the organization	Part of the original set of studies. Findings were largely replicated by Study 2	None

SDO = social dominance orientation.

Table 2. Predicting Judgments of Immorality

Predictors	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	Std. beta	95% CI	<i>p</i>	Std. beta	95% CI	<i>P</i>	Std. beta	95% CI	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	0.00	−0.13, 0.13	1.000	0.00	−0.14, 0.14	1.000	−0.00	−0.13, 0.13	1.000
SDO	−0.32	−0.45, −0.19	< .001				−0.41	−0.56, −0.26	< .001
Left–right orientation				−0.04	−0.19, 0.10	.550	0.17	0.02, 0.32	.030
Random effects									
σ^2	0.37			0.37			0.37		
τ_{00}	0.51 _{ID}			0.61 _{ID}			0.49 _{ID}		
ICC	0.58			0.62			0.57		
<i>N</i>	127 _{ID}			127 _{ID}			127 _{ID}		
Observations	635			635			635		
Marginal R^2 /conditional R^2	.133/.634			.033/.634			.153/.635		

Note. Regressions in Table 2, all control for vignette. CI = confidence interval; SDO = social dominance orientation.

harshly after accounting for SDO (Model 3). Importantly, across different types of organizational misconduct, higher SDO continued to predict more lenient moral judgment even after controlling for political orientation (Model 3; see Table 2). This finding supports the second link in our theorized model, in which anti-egalitarians hold organizations less accountable for misconduct.

Study 2

Study 2 tested whether perceived agency mediates the relationship between SDO and judgments of immorality. Moreover, since perceiving an act as immoral can causally

affect mind perception (Gray & Wegner, 2009; Schein & Gray, 2014), Study 2 examined item-order effects related to mind perception and perceived immorality. Study 2 is an exact replication of a previous study that had a smaller sample, which found similar results (see Supplemental Study 3 for full details). Study 2 was preregistered on <https://osf.io/2wu34/>.

Method

Based on a power analysis of the results found in an earlier study (see Supplemental Materials), we recruited a convenience sample size of 700 U.S. residents on Prolific (Palan &

Schitter, 2018). The sample was quota-matched to the population distribution of political party identification (42% Independent, 30% Democrat, and 28% Republican). In total, 702 participants completed the survey, and 36 (5.1%) failed the preregistered comprehension check, leaving a final sample of $N = 666$.

In a within-subjects, repeated measures design, participants read, in random order, four vignettes of organizational misconduct, similar to those used in Study 1.³ For each vignette, participants were asked the three-item measure of perceived immorality from Study 1 ($M = 6.26$, $SD = 1.03$, $\alpha = .74$), in addition to three items measuring perceived agency (“capable of: having intentions, doing things on purpose, planned action,” $M = 5.87$, $SD = 1.55$, $\alpha = .94$) and experience (“capable of: having emotions, feeling, experiencing pleasure and pain,” $M = 3.37$, $SD = 2.02$, $\alpha = .96$) adapted from the work of Waytz and Young (2014). Whether participants received the mind perception or immorality items first was counterbalanced at the participant level, to allow for analyses of item-order effects.⁴

After responding to the four vignettes, participants reported their political orientation on a scale from 1 (*very liberal*) to 7 (*very conservative*) ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.89$), the 16-item SDO₇ scale ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.37$, $\alpha = .95$), and basic demographic questions as in Study 2. We debriefed participants at the end to clarify that the vignettes were fictional.

Results

Item-Order Analyses. In contrast to our preregistered hypothesis (H1b) that the effect of SDO on perceived agency would be influenced by item-order presentation, we found no item-order effect. The hypothesized item-order effect was based on the theory that the SDO–agency relationship was driven, in part, by a motivated reaction to organizational conduct. Based on a mixed-effects model with random intercepts for participants (to control for repeated measures) and a fixed effect for vignette, we did not find evidence for the interaction ($p = .967$) predicted. Item order also had no effect on any variable, relative to Supplemental Study 3 (see SOM) where participants rated the organizations 0.86 points higher in agency if they received the moral judgment items first ($p = .008$). Rather, agency attributions were notably higher ($M = 5.87$, median = 6.33, mode = 7.00) than the agency attributions to the similar but morally neutral vignettes in Supplemental Study 2 (see SOM; $M = 5.03$, median = 5.33, mode = 7.00), two-sided t -test of difference: $t(454.36) = 8.60$, $p < .001$.

Mediation Analyses. As preregistered, because no interaction of item order was observed, we proceeded with a mediation

model of SDO (IV), agency (mediator), and perceived immorality (DV) without any moderation of item order (i.e., the equivalent of Model 4, Hayes, 2017), as captured by Figure 1. All models reported below were mixed-effects models with random intercepts for participants and fixed effect controlling for vignette.

The preregistration specified two linear mixed-effects models to test the three hypothesized associations in the mediation model: a negative SDO–agency relationship (H1a), negative SDO–immorality relationship (H2), and a positive agency–immorality relationship (H3). However, both models displayed highly non-normal residuals (a Shapiro–Wilk test of normality found significant non-normal residual patterns, $p < .001$ for both modes). To address these modeling validity concerns, we deviated from the preregistration, but did so as minimally as possible, and attempted to establish the robustness of the hypothesized associations in light of the high skew of the agency and immorality measures. We used four methods for addressing skew in the data, and issues of residual normality and heteroscedasticity, across all three hypotheses.⁵ As these robust methods deviated from the preregistration, we report here the most conservative path for testing the hypothesized indirect mediation effect of SDO on immorality through agency (H4a). The most conservative path was the mixed-effect gamma regressions, where the p value of the SDO–agency association (H1a) was the largest (.034). Entering the gamma regressions into the preregistered mediation model (SDO–agency–immorality, equivalent to Model 4, Hayes, 2017) with 5000 Monte Carlo simulated 95% confidence intervals, we found support for H4a (indirect effect $b = -0.02$, 95% CI = $-0.037, -0.001$, $p = .034$). These results indicate that perceived agency partially mediated the negative SDO–immorality association. These results support the theory that people high in SDO judge organizational transgression as less immoral because they attribute less agentic mind to organizations. Analyses using the other three methods showed the same results (see online analysis code).

Study 3

Study 3 was a high-powered attempt to directly replicate the findings of a previously conducted study (Supplemental Study 2). To examine the idea that those high in SDO find corporations less threatening due to the stratifying nature of hierarchies in them, Study 3 also included a measure of general threat perceptions to test the prediction that SDO is associated with less perceived agency because those high in SDO see corporations as less threatening. Study 3 differed from Studies 1 to 2, however, in that it measured mind perception and feelings of threat toward a *neutral* organization that did not engage in wrongdoing. Study 3 was preregistered at: <https://osf.io/c627w/>.

Method

Participants were recruited through the survey recruitment platform Prolific, based on a power analysis of the SDO–agency relationship observed in Supplemental Study 2 (see SOM), a sample of $N = 779$ was needed to obtain 80% power. As per the preregistration, 820 participants were recruited, with an expected 5% attention check failure rate. The sample was a nationally representative sample of the United States, based on age, gender, and ethnicity quotas set by Prolific. In total, 823 participants completed the survey and 33 (4.0%) failed the attention check, leaving a final sample of $N = 790$.

First, participants saw a generic picture of a corporate building and a brief description of the fictional organization “DenComp” (taken from the work of Tang & Gray, 2018). Participants then rated the organization’s agency ($M = 5.09$, $\alpha = .87$) and experience ($M = 3.71$, $\alpha = .92$) using the same six items from Study 2, and rated the perceived threat of the organization across three items using 7-point Likert-type scales (“To what extent do you think the following describe this organization: Threatening/Unfriendly/Antagonistic”; $M = 2.52$, $\alpha = .91$). Finally, participants completed the 8-item SDO₇ Short Scale ($M = 2.48$, $\alpha = .90$) and completed brief demographic questions.

Results

As hypothesized (H1b), the organization was attributed significantly more agency ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.48$) than experience ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.73$), $t(789) = 27.17$, $p < .001$). However, contrary to Hypothesis 1a, we did not observe a correlation between SDO and agency ($r_s = -.03$, $p = .481$). Contrary to Hypothesis 2a, Threat was negatively correlated with agency ($r_s = -.18$, $p < .001$) rather than positively correlated. And contrary to Hypothesis 2b, SDO and threat were not negatively correlated ($r_s = .03$, $p = .371$). We discuss these results further in the “General Discussion” section.

Study 4

Study 4 was conducted after Study 3 failed to replicate the SDO–agency relationship in a morally neutral context (observed in early studies we have now placed in the SOM), and after Study 3 found that threat and agency were negatively correlated, rather than positively. As we thought it was possible that the association between SDO, threat, and perceived agency would more reliably surface in contexts that involve motivated reasoning (Formanowicz et al., 2023), we returned to the context of organizational wrongdoing in Study 4, where we also used a proximal measure of perceived threat rather than measuring general feelings of threat. Study 4 was preregistered at: <https://osf.io/8b7e9/>.

Method

Participants were recruited through the survey recruitment platform Prolific. Participants were a convenience sample of U.S. participants, quota-matched by political party (Republicans 30%, Democrats 32%, and Independent 38%) based on Gallup polling from October 2024. The pre-registered target sample was $N = 820$, based on the same power analysis used in Study 3. Due to researcher error, a sample of 801 was collected, rather than 820. Thirty-five participants (4.4%) failed the attention check, leaving a final $N = 766$.

First, participants read about Champion Transportation knowingly transporting counterfeit products made in sweatshops, which was taken from Study 1. Participants then rated the organization’s agency ($M = 5.04$, $\alpha = .89$) and experience ($M = 3.66$, $\alpha = .85$) using the same six items from Study 2, and rated the perceived proximal threat of the organization across four items using 7-point Likert-type scales (“If Champion Transportation was operating in the town/city you live in, to what extent would you feel the following: Concerned/Uncomfortable/Nervous/Worried”; $M = 4.56$, $\alpha = .93$). Finally, participants completed the eight-item SDO₇ short scale ($M = 2.62$, $\alpha = .90$) and completed brief demographic questions.

Results

As hypothesized (H1b), the organization was attributed significantly more agency ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.67$) than experience ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.72$), $t(764) = 25.52$, $p < .001$). In support of Hypothesis 2b, SDO and Threat were negatively correlated ($r_s = -.20$, $p < .001$). However, contrary to Hypothesis 1a and the findings in Study 2, we did not observe a correlation between SDO and agency ($r_s = -.04$, $p = .300$). Contrary to Hypothesis 2a, agency and threat were not positively correlated ($r_s = .01$, $p = .803$).

General Discussion

Across multiple studies (presented here and in the SOM), we consistently found that people high in SDO judge organizational transgressions less harshly. These results generalized across organizational size and industry, and they were not explained by political orientation. Evidence for the mechanism for this relationship, however, was mixed. In the context of moral transgressions, we found evidence for a negative SDO–agency relationship in two studies (Supplemental Studies 1 and 2), but in another, it was contingent on a moderating variable (Supplemental 3), and in another, it did not replicate (Study 4). Though agency is theoretically related to threat, and in line with social dominance theory those high in SDO perceived less threat from organizations (Study 4), we found no evidence to support the theory that threat and agency are associated with organizational perceptions. More concisely, (1) people high in

SDO judge organizational transgressions less harshly, but (2) the evidence for the explanatory role of agency and threat are mixed or tentative, and (3) agency was not associated with threat despite similar theoretical foundations.

First, this project began with the goal of integrating social dominance theory and dyadic morality theory to understand how individual ideology influences judgments of organizations, and our pattern of results have uncovered a separate, though related theoretical conundrum. Though a large body of work in the areas of dual process social perception (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Fiske et al., 2007), social dominance theory, and dyadic morality suggest a positive link between threat and agency, we found no evidence they were linked for perception of organizations. While the studies presented here do not provide a clear answer to this conundrum, they do highlight conceptual issues with these two theoretical traditions, and the limits of these two theories in generalizing to the context of corporate misconduct.

Second, certain predictions derived from dyadic morality theory (DMT) were borne out: The relationship between agency and judgments of immorality was consistent. But SDO did not consistently predict lower perceived agency. This inconsistency suggests to us that it is either a small relationship or that this relationship differs for non-human entities like corporations. Alternatively, it is possible that mind perception is a distal mechanism in the relationship between ideological motivated reasoning and moral judgments, and other proximal mechanisms that are more closely tied to ideological preferences are at work (e.g., system justification, Jost, 2020). In the context of organizations, whether the organization is hierarchy enhancing or hierarchy attenuating is an important consideration. By examining corporations, our studies focused on the former, which are most prevalent in organizational research and its impact on social outcomes (e.g., Card, 2013). Non-profit organizations, such as labor union groups and civil rights advocacy groups, may have a hierarchical structure, but aim to reduce social hierarchies. Future research on SDO and organizational outcomes would benefit from examining these other types of organizations.

As we are the first to investigate the relationship between ideology and mind perception, it is not surprising that the relationship is complex. A clearer picture of this theoretical complexity would have implications for the psychology of dyadic morality, corporate personhood, and for understanding when citizens believe corporations are too threatening to be afforded certain legal rights.

Third, there may be more to unpack for agency, agentic minds, and threats. Recent research suggests that people conceptualize agency in a number of ways for individuals, such as women in the workplace (Ma et al., 2022). For example, competence is different from dominance, although both are considered agency, and it is possible that the same applies to organizations. People may have

different conceptualizations of agency in the context of a corporation. If this is true, then the absence of a relationship between threat and agency would point to a need to further refine the role of threat in SDO, as our attempts to measure it found that its relationship to SDO was highly context dependent. Threat may be currently too broadly construed in social dominance theory. For example, an intrapsychic threat to an individual (existential threat, e.g., Sullivan et al., 2012), outgroup threats to the ingroup (e.g., Brambilla & Butz, 2013), the social hierarchical system (Jost, 2020), and moral contamination (e.g., Rottman et al., 2014; Tang et al., 2023) may all be threats, but they likely have a range of psychological underpinnings. Perhaps important to note is that threat is usually theorized, but rarely measured, in SDO work (Böhm et al., 2020). As such, a more granular conceptualization of threat may be helpful for specific predictions.

Though this work opens up further questions, it also provides many fruitful avenues for future research. First, theories of moral psychology have focused on judgments of individuals, even though emergent research shows that people make moral judgments of non-living entities, from physical robots (Waytz et al., 2010a) to disembodied artificial intelligence (Schoenherr & Thomson, 2024), to organizations (Tang & Gray, 2018). Whether these individual-centric theories generalize to organizations and to the context of corporate misconduct may depend on whether organizational targets are thought of as single entitative actors or a collection of individual actors (e.g., Tang et al., 2020). As a further complication, while research on moral judgments of organizations have focused on for-profit firms, organizations can also be sports teams, governmental organizations, and NGOs and other nonprofits, and it is an empirical question as to whether the type of organization also makes a difference. The relationship between SDO and DMT may also depend on the role that threat plays when harm reinforces existing social hierarchies that people value (e.g., status and respect in one's social group).

In conclusion, in a series of studies that included high-powered preregistered replication studies, we found that those high in SDO judged corporate misconduct more leniently and uncovered the complexity in explaining this relationship within the scope of this project. In the spirit of open science and transparency in data, we present these findings that, though may not provide a theoretically clean and simple narrative by the traditional standards in social science, we believe will allow refinement of existing theories examined here.

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Author Contributions

Jim Sidanius sadly passed away during this research, on June 29, 2021. Jim oversaw Study 1 and Supplemental Studies 1 to 3, and reviewed/approved early drafts of this manuscript and the authorship order. All authors contributed to the design of the studies. J.L. and S.T. approved the manuscript's final version. J.L. proposed the original research question, facilitated data collection and the analyses in consultation with coauthors, and curated the open materials.

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Ethics

All studies were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards at Harvard University, Clemson University, and Princeton University. All participants gave informed consent to participate.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. To be clear, we distinguish between hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating organizations. In our set of studies, we focus on corporate organizations that are for profit and often hierarchy enhancing, both within and outside the organization itself. We discuss implications for organizations that are hierarchy attenuating in the "General Discussion" section.
2. For complete materials and items, see: <https://osf.io/muj54/>
3. For example,

Stream-Water Engineering is a small engineering firm which contracts with state and local governments to repair, maintain and inspect publicly owned bridges and dams. Shortly after a small, rural bridge that was inspected and approved by Stream-Water Engineering fractured and collapsed, investigators found that the inspectors had accepted bribes to approve the unstable bridge.

4. For complete materials, see: <https://osf.io/muj54/>
5. First, we used partial Spearman's correlations, controlling for participant effects and vignettes. Consistent associations were observed in the hypothesized directions: Agency–SDO $r_s = -.14$ ($p < .001$), SDO–immorality $r_s = -.25$ ($p < .001$), and immorality–agency $r_s = .29$ ($p < .001$). Next, using the exact mixture model structures specified in the preregistration, we performed the analyses in three extensions of the generalized linear mixture model framework. We ran the models using mixed-effects beta regressions (Smithson & Verkuilen, 2006) with logit link functions, and mixed-effects gamma regressions (Ng & Cribbie, 2017) with identity link functions, both flexible families of generalized linear models designed specifically to model highly skewed, heteroscedastic data. Finally, we used mixed-effects ordinal regressions with probit link functions, where agency and immorality were treated as ordered categorical DVs. Hypotheses 1a, 2, and 3 were consistently supported across all these robust analyses. Hypotheses 2 and 3 were consistently supported with p values $< .001$, and Hypothesis 1a was consistently supported with p values ranging from .008 to .034.
6. For complete materials, see: <https://osf.io/muj54/>

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