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Anti-egalitarians perceive corporations as less agentic and judge their misconduct less harshly

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Abstract

How society should respond to corporate misconduct is the subject of intense debate. Although the ideologies that people hold are key to understanding how they make moral judgments, existing research has been silent on how ideological beliefs drive psychological perceptions of corporations and responses to their misconduct. Across five studies, we examine the role ideological attitudes about social hierarchy play in driving perceptions of corporations and their misconduct. First, we find that those who hold anti-egalitarian attitudes (those high in social dominance orientation) are less likely to perceive corporations as possessing an agentic mind (Studies 1a and 1b). Second, they judge corporate misconduct as less immoral (Studies 2 and 3), even after controlling for left-right political orientation. Third, we find evidence that this is a motivated process: organizational wrongdoing which attenuates (vs. enhances) social hierarchies reverses the relationship between agentic mind perception and punishment (Study 4). These results highlight the importance of ideology's role on organization mind perception and subsequent moral judgments of corporate misconduct.

Keywords: social dominance; anthropomorphism; mind perception; corporate misconduct; morality

Introduction

In 2017, the credit reporting agency Equifax had 140 million social security numbers stolen during a cyber breach. As part of its punishment, the Republican head of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) fined the company a record \$575 million, with \$425 million going to victims—amounting to at most \$125 for each person (FTC, 2019; Law, 2019). This outcome drew polarized responses along ideological lines. While Republicans accepted the decision, Democrats and information-security experts criticized it as too lenient (Marks, 2019; Newman, 2019). Reasons for the disagreement are likely multiply determined. However, given the partisan disagreement over what was the largest FTC fine ever issued, we suggest that moral judgments of an organization's wrongdoing could 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 also suggest 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 (K. 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—groups comprised of people structured hierarchically—is poorly understood. A single act of organizational misconduct, such as the Volkswagen emission scandal (Hotten, 2015), can have a large effect on millions of people.

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Given that the ideologies of powerful figures—judges, congresspeople—can influence the consequences for wrongdoing organizations, it is important to understand how ideology drives punishment of misconduct and informs policy discussions surrounding corporate regulation. We focus on an ideology that is especially pertinent to organizations: social dominance orientation (SDO).

SDO (Ho et al., 2015; Sidanius et al., 2016) captures individual differences in peoples' preferences for stratified versus egalitarian social arrangements. 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. 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). They support these hierarchy-enhancing actions even when they are morally questionable, such as making unethical decisions that maximize self-gain over benefiting the collective (Son Hing et al., 2007), being less likely to confront people who use racial slurs in the workplace (Rosette et al., 2013), and being less concerned with harm and fairness violations (Federico et al., 2013).

But despite the research on SDO's relationship to intergroup, political, and moral attitudes, there has been no research on how SDO influences moral judgment of organizations' misconduct. We argue that those high in SDO would be motivated to judge organizational misconduct less harshly than those low in SDO. Extant and related research supports this view. First, hierarchically structured groups, such as organizations, often have uneven distributions of resources (Halevy et al., 2011). Although concerns regarding fairness are often present in

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organizations (Colquitt & Greenberg, 2003), organizations can nonetheless serve to maintain social hierarchies (Amis et al., 2020; Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015). For example, human resources practices contribute to gender discrimination in the workplace (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015), informal networks and organizational norms of cultural fit can sideline minorities (Viator, 2001), and those high in SDO are more likely to join workplaces that enhance hierarchical structures (Haley & Sidanius, 2005). Finally, people tend to downplay the seriousness of moral transgressions when they are motivated to do so, such as when an outcome benefits them despite an unfair process (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002) or when they use different moral principles to justify an outcome (Uhlmann et al., 2015). Taken together, these findings suggest that those high in SDO would judge organizational wrongdoing less harshly than those low in SDO. We suggest that this relationship is 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 (Rai & Diermeier, 2015; Tang & Gray, 2018). How people perceive the mind of an organization—the extent to which they perceive it as possessing human capacities, such as the ability to strategize and experience unhappiness (Epley et al., 2007; Jago & Laurin, 2017)—influences how harshly they judge it after wrongdoing. According to this model, mind perception is generally split along two dimensions (H. M. Gray et al., 2007)—*agency* (the capacity to do things like planning and communicating) and *experience* (the capacity to feel, such as emoting). While 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 also means that organizations are perceived as more capable of perpetrating harm and taking responsibility, but less capable of feeling suffering

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and being victimized (K. Gray & Wegner, 2009; Schein & Gray, 2018; Waytz, Gray, et al., 2010). As a result, people are angrier at wrongdoing organizations and desire more punishment compared to wrongdoing individuals (Rai & Diermeier, 2015). On the other hand, when organizations are imbued with experiential qualities, people more easily forgive them (Tang & Gray, 2018). In addition to increased experience, however, we suggest based on past research (Schein & Gray, 2018) that reduced perceived organizational agency can also reduce moral blame.

Past research on perceptions of threat suggests an association between SDO and agency attributions. When reminded of a personal enemy, people perceive them as powerful and attribute exaggerated influence (i.e., agency) to them to compensate for feelings of low control (Sullivan et al., 2010). Since those high in SDO perceive hierarchy-enhancing groups as less threatening than hierarchy-attenuating groups (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), it is possible that people high in SDO feel for-profit corporations are less threatening to the stability of social hierarchies, and thereby attribute them less agency. Taken together, these findings suggest that those high in SDO will perceive organizations as less agentic, as long as the organization does not engage in behavior which attenuates (i.e., threatens) social hierarchies. Given that perceived agency evokes harsher moral judgments, the reduced attribution of agency to organizations means that people high in SDO would also make more lenient moral judgments of wrongdoing organizations.

In sum, we hypothesize that those high (vs. low) in SDO judge organization wrongdoing less harshly because they attribute less mental agency to organizations, but that this relationship will be contingent on organizations engaging in wrongdoing which enhances existing social hierarchies. We tested our hypotheses across five studies. Study 1a directly investigated whether

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SDO predicted lower attributions of agency toward organizations, absent any misconduct. Study 1b investigated whether the difference between agency and experience was uniquely associated with SDO, absent any misconduct. By measuring mind perception without any corporate misconduct, we would be able to isolate whether those high in SDO generally perceive low agentic mind in organizations or whether this relationship only surfaces when there is misconduct. Study 2 tested whether SDO predicts lower perceived immorality of hierarchy-enhancing organizational misconduct after controlling for liberalism vs. conservatism. Study 3 sought to replicate the relationships observed in Studies 1-2 in a single paradigm. Lastly, Study 4 experimentally manipulated whether the organizational wrongdoing was hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuated, and examined how this affected mind perception and punishment.

Open Science

All data, analysis scripts, and survey materials (with data coding embedded within) associate with this manuscript are publicly available on the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/muj54/?view_only=2c348f64a1614b0a814cc034f506b4cb. Although the studies were not preregistered, we report all manipulations, measures, and exclusions in these studies, in addition to power and sensitivity analyses. The lead author prepared all open materials, and they strongly encourage anyone with questions to contact them.

Study 1a

Method

Participants read brief descriptions of five fictional organizations and provided their perceptions of those organizations' agency and experience. For each organization, we provided information on its name and the work it does, such that the descriptions were neutral in nature. By excluding any information on misconduct we were able to home in on the relation between SDO and mind perception. Additionally, in order to generalize our results, we used organizations that varied in size and industry.

Study 1a utilized a within-subject, repeated measures design. A sample of $N = 75$ was determined *a priori* as to obtain 375 total responses across five repeated measures, sufficient to detect a small-medium effect size ($f = 0.15$) with greater than 80% power (in a 1x5 within-subjects repeated-measures ANOVA design). Participants on Amazon's TurkPrime platform (Litman et al., 2017) took part in the 5 minute survey for \$0.75. After providing informed consent, participants read, in randomized order, five vignettes that described fictional corporations of different sizes and industrial sectors. For example, participants read "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." For each vignette participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they believed the company was capable of agency (e.g., "having intentions", $\alpha = 0.91$), and experience (e.g., "having emotions",

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$\alpha = 0.96$) on a scale from 1 (*not at all capable*) to 7 (*very capable*), adapted from (Waytz & Young, 2014). For complete materials and items, please see Online Materials¹.

After responding to the five vignettes, participants indicated their political orientation on a scale from 1 (*very liberal*) to 7 (*very conservative*). Because political orientation is associated with SDO, we measured it as a covariate to ensure any observed relationship between SDO and mind perception was not confounded by political preferences. Lastly, participants completed the 16-item SDO₇ Scale ($\alpha = .96$).

Results

We first tested whether participants viewed organizations as having higher agency than experience. Replicating past findings (Jago et al., 2019; Knobe & Prinz, 2008; Rai & Diermeier, 2015; Tang & Gray, 2018), a paired-sample *t*-test found that, overall, the corporate targets were attributed more agency ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 0.09$) than experience ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.10$), $t(374) = 15.08$, $p < .001$.

Utilizing 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 found that higher SDO predicted lower agency attributions ($\beta = -.26$, 95% CI $[-0.46, -0.06]$, $p = .014$). Furthermore, this relationship held even after controlling for political orientation ($\beta = -.28$, 95% CI $[-0.51, -0.04]$, $p = .020$), and political orientation did not predict mind perception ($\beta = .04$, 95% CI $[-0.19, 0.27]$, $p = .743$). SDO did not predict experience attributions ($\beta = -.06$, 95% CI $[-0.26, 0.14]$, $SE = .10$, $p = .562$).

¹ https://osf.io/muj54/?view_only=2c348f64a1614b0a814cc034f506b4cb

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As past work has consistently found a large difference in the absolute levels of agency and experience attributed to corporate targets (Knobe & Prinz, 2008; Rai & Diermeier, 2015; Tang & Gray, 2018), perhaps it is the *difference* between agency and experience that is associated with SDO, as a smaller difference may represent a less prototypical corporation in the eyes of perceivers. To examine this possibility, we took the within-participant raw difference score (agency – experience) and regressed it onto SDO, with random intercepts for participant and a fixed effect for target. We found that SDO was negatively associated with the difference score of agency and experience ($b = -.25$, 95% CI $[-0.48, -0.01]$, $p = .043$), suggesting that those high in SDO may be less likely to perceive a large difference in agentic and experiential mind.

Consistent with past findings, we found that organizations were attributed more agency than experience. Importantly, supporting our hypotheses, Study 1a provided evidence that those high in SDO tended to view organizations as less agentic, even after controlling for political orientation. We also found that those high in SDO showed a smaller difference between perceived agency and experience compared to those low in SDO. However, analyzing raw difference scores can be statistically problematic and differences are best analyzed using polynomial regression (Edwards & Parry, 1993). Because the use of repeated mind perception measures in Study 1a precludes polynomial analyses, we designed Study 1b in a way that would allow us to examine whether SDO was associated with the difference between agency and experience in a statistically robust fashion.

Study 1b

Method

Study 1b sought to generalize our findings and address statistical issues surrounding the usage of raw difference scores by using response surface analysis (Barranti et al., 2017; Shanock et al., 2010), a polynomial regression technique, to examine whether the difference between agency and experience was uniquely associated with SDO. A power analysis presented by Barranti et al. (2017) found that 550 participants were needed to detect a small polynomial effect in the response surface analysis framework. As such, we collected 551 participants on TurkPrime. Participants saw a generic picture of a corporate building and a brief description of the fictional organization “DenComp” (taken from Tang & Gray, 2018). Participants then rated the organization’s agency and experience using the same items from Study 1a (agency $\alpha = 0.90$; experience $\alpha = 0.92$). Lastly, participants completed the 8-item SDO₇ Short Scale ($\alpha = 0.92$) and completed brief demographic questions.

Results

Replicating the findings from Study 1a, we found that, overall, the organization was attributed significantly more agency ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.70$) than experience ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.87$), $t(550) = 23.40$, $p < .001$). Also replicating the findings from Study 1a, we found a significant negative relationship between SDO and agency ($r_s = -.12$, $n = 551$, $p = .004$). We found no relationship between SDO and experience ($r_s = .05$, $n = 551$, $p = .242$).

To examine the relationship between SDO and organization mind perception, we

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utilized response surface analysis (Barranti et al., 2017), an extension of polynomial regression.

Per the RSA framework, we first entered both agency and experience (centered on the scale midpoint) as predictors of SDO into a regression. We then entered the polynomial terms for agency and experience, along with an interaction between agency and experience, in predicting SDO (see Table 1 for results). In the RSA framework, if there is at least one significant quadratic effect, and if the second model significantly improves model fit above the first, then there is sufficient evidence warranting a unique polynomial effect.

Table 1: Predicting SDO with Response Surface Analysis

<i>Predictors</i>	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>b</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	2.74	2.58 – 2.91	<0.001	3.05	2.78 – 3.32	<0.001
Agency	-0.16	-0.25 – -0.07	0.001	-0.13	-0.34 – 0.08	0.240
Experience	0.12	0.03 – 0.20	0.006	0.04	-0.16 – 0.25	0.680
Agency^2				-0.04	-0.10 – 0.02	0.193
Experience^2				-0.07	-0.12 – -0.02	0.009
Agency*Experience				0.03	-0.06 – 0.13	0.482
Observations	551			551		
R ² / R ² adjusted	0.022 / 0.018			0.052 / 0.043		

A likelihood ratio test found Model 2 to be a significantly better fit than Model 1 ($F(3) = 5.82, p < .001$), and we found a significant negative polynomial effect of experience in predicting SDO in Model 2, allowing us to proceed with the response surface analysis. In plotting the

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response surface using robust standard errors we found both a curvilinear effect of the line of convergence ($b(a2) = -.08$, 95% CI $[-.12, -.03]$, $p < .001$), and a main effect of incongruence ($b(a4) = -.15$, 95% CI $[-0.29, -0.004]$, $p = .044$). Interpretively, this means that higher SDO continues to predict lower perceived organization agency, alongside the polynomial effect of experience (see Figure 1). This replicated the findings from Study 1a, showing that higher SDO is overall associated with less perceived agency toward organizations. In both studies, we only gave neutral information about the organizations, suggesting that those high in SDO have a general tendency to attribute less agentic mind to organizations than those low in SDO.

One limitation of the RSA analysis is that it does not allow us to examine how a fourth variable (e.g., perceived immorality of organizational misconduct) affects the observed SDO-agency-experience relationship. As such, alternative methods for examining difference scores, such as moderated regression, will be necessary when examining our full conceptual model of how agency and experience affect the SDO-perceived immorality relationship.

Figure 1: How Anti-Egalitarians Anthropomorphize Organizations. Plot of response surface. *** $p < .001$. * $p < .05$. † $p < .10$

Overall, Studies 1a and 1b provide evidence for a direct, negative linear relationship between agency and SDO, which is consistent with the first part of our overall model that those high in SDO judge corporate misconduct more leniently as a result of lower perceived agency.

Study 2

Method

While Studies 1a and 1b showed that those high in SDO perceive lower agentic organizational mind, Study 2 tested whether those high (vs. low) in SDO would judge hierarchy-enhancing organizational wrongdoing more leniently. To generalize our findings, we

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sampled different organization types and kinds of transgressions. Furthermore, Study 2 examined political orientation as an alternative explanation. Although political orientation—the ideology that people hold about the extent to which society should be liberal or conservative—is conceptually distinct from SDO, it is associated with SDO. As recent research suggests that conservatives may care less about organizations contributing to public good (Jasinenko et al., 2020), we also measured and controlled for political orientation as an alternative explanation.

Study 2 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 1x5 repeated-measures 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 \$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 <0.001).

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 fifteen 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 3-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*). For complete materials and items, please see Online

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Materials². 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 which 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 DV and vignettes as a control variable. In the first model, we entered SDO as the IV. In the second model, we entered political orientation as the 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 harshly after accounting for SDO (Model 3). Importantly, higher SDO continued to predict more lenient moral judgment even after controlling for political orientation (Model 3; see Table 2). Across different types of organizational misconduct, those

² https://osf.io/muj54/?view_only=2c348f64a1614b0a814cc034f506b4cb

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high in SDO make more lenient moral judgments, whether we controlled for political orientation or not. This finding supports our theorizing, based on social dominance theory, that anti-egalitarians hold organizations less accountable for misconduct.

Table 2: Predicting Judgments of Immorality

<i>Predictors</i>	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>Std. Beta</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Std. Beta</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Std. Beta</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<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	<0.001				-0.41	-0.56 – -0.26	<0.001
Left-Right Orientation				-0.04	-0.19 – 0.10	0.550	0.17	0.02 – 0.32	0.030
Vignette #1	0.19	0.10 – 0.29	<0.001	0.19	0.10 – 0.29	<0.001	0.19	0.10 – 0.29	<0.001
Vignette #2	0.06	-0.04 – 0.15	0.243	0.06	-0.04 – 0.15	0.243	0.06	-0.04 – 0.15	0.243
Vignette #3	-0.17	-0.27 – -0.08	<0.001	-0.17	-0.27 – -0.08	<0.001	-0.17	-0.27 – -0.08	<0.001
Vignette #4	0.17	0.08 – 0.26	<0.001	0.17	0.08 – 0.26	<0.001	0.17	0.08 – 0.26	<0.001
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		
N	127 _{ID}			127 _{ID}			127 _{ID}		
Observations	635			635			635		
Marginal R ² / Conditional R ²	0.133 / 0.634			0.033 / 0.634			0.153 / 0.635		

Study 3

Study 3 sought to test the associations observed in Studies 1a-2 by measuring mind perception and immorality in a single paradigm. Moreover, Study 3 sought to test for item-order effects related to mind perception and perceived immorality, given the evidence that perceiving an act as immoral can causally affect mind perception (K. Gray & Wegner, 2009; Schein & Gray, 2014).

Method

A sample size of 120 subjects was decided upon *a priori* using the heuristic that a 50% increase in sample size relative to Study 1a (after anticipated exclusions) would be sufficiently powered to detect small effect sizes. Post-hoc sensitivity analysis of a 1x4 repeated-measures ANOVA showed that, with 80% power and $N = 103$ (after exclusion, detailed below), we were sufficiently powered to detect an effect size of $f = 0.116$. As the observed effects in Study 3 were all larger than $f = 0.116$ (equivalent to standardized $\beta = \sim 0.07$), we were confident that the analyses were sufficiently powered.

Participants were recruited on TurkPrime using a 5-minute within-subjects, repeated measures survey. Participants were paid \$0.85. Seventeen participants failed the comprehension check, leaving a final $N = 103$ across four repeated measures (412 responses in total). Participants read, in random order, four vignettes of organizational misconduct, similar to those used in Study 2 (e.g., “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

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Engineering fractured and collapsed, investigators found that the inspectors had accepted bribes to approve the unstable bridge.”).

For each vignette, participants were asked the 3-item measure of perceived immorality from Study 2 ($\alpha = .84$), in addition to the perceived agency ($\alpha = .93$) and experience ($\alpha = .97$) items from Studies 1a and 1b. We counterbalanced whether participants received the mind perception or immorality items first to address concerns of item-order effects between the agency and immorality measures. For complete materials and items, please see Online Materials³.

After responding to the four vignettes, participants reported their political orientation on a scale from 1 (*very liberal*) to 7 (*very conservative*), the 16-item SDO₇ scale ($\alpha = .96$), and basic demographic questions as in Study 2. We debriefed participants at the end to clarify that the vignettes were fictional.

Results

Preliminary item order analyses. Compared to receiving the immorality items first, receiving the mind perception items first did not affect experience attributions ($b = .21$, 95% CI [-0.58, 0.99], $p = .602$), or immorality judgments ($b = -.20$, 95% CI [-0.60, 0.20], $p = .319$), but did have a large and significant effect on agency attributions ($b = -.86$, 95% CI [-1.50, -0.23], $p = .008$), although it did not interact with immorality in predicting agency ($b = -.11$, 95% CI [-0.29, 0.06], $p = .193$). This meant that participants on average rated the organizations 0.86 points higher in agency if they received the moral judgment items first. We thus control for item-order in the analyses for agency below.

³ https://osf.io/muj54/?view_only=2c348f64a1614b0a814cc034f506b4cb

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Perceived agency. We first examined the effect of SDO on perceived agency. We utilized linear mixed-effects regressions with random intercepts modeled for participant (to control for repeated measures) and a fixed effect controlling for vignette (effects coded). First, although item order had a marginal effect of SDO on perceived agency, we partially replicated our findings from Studies 1a and 1b that SDO is positively associated with agency. That is, simple slopes analyses revealed that higher SDO was associated with lower perceived agency when the agency items came after the immorality items ($\beta = -.31$, 95% CI $[-0.60, -0.03]$, $p = .031$), but the effect did not emerge when the agency items came before the immorality items ($\beta = .01$, 95% CI $[-0.22, 0.24]$, $p = .940$). The interaction of item-order and SDO was marginally significant ($\beta = .16$, 95% CI $[-0.02, 0.35]$, $p = .083$), and the main effect of SDO on agency (with item order effects-coded in the regression) was not statistically significant ($\beta = -.15$, 95% CI $[-0.34, 0.03]$, $p = .101$). The order of item presentation may have had an effect because judging someone as immoral increases attributions of agency (K. Gray & Wegner, 2009).

Perceived immorality. We next examined the association of SDO and agency with perceived immorality using multiple regression with random intercepts for participant and a fixed effect for vignettes. Replicating the findings from Study 2, we found that SDO was negatively associated with perceived immorality ($\beta = -.35$, 95% CI $[-0.49, -0.20]$, $p < 0.001$). We also found that agency was positively associated with immorality ($\beta = .18$, 95% CI $[0.06, 0.30]$, $p = 0.003$). Put another way, people high in SDO judged the organizational transgression less harshly and perceiving an agentic mind also increased how harshly people judged the transgression.

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Moderation analyses. To examine the hypothesis that the SDO-immorality association is motivated, we conducted a simple moderation analysis with agency moderating the linear association between SDO and perceived immorality. The interaction between SDO and agency was significant ($\beta = 0.21$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.33], $p < 0.001$). Specifically, when people perceived high agency in the organization (+1 SD), the effect of SDO on immorality was not significant ($\beta = -0.15$, 95% CI [-0.32, 0.02], $p = 0.091$). On the other hand, when people perceived low agency in the organization (-1 SD), SDO had a negative association with perceived immorality ($\beta = -0.57$, 95% CI [-0.75, -0.38], $p < 0.001$). This result supports the hypothesis that people high in SDO judge the transgression as less immoral because they attribute more agentic mind to the organization.

Study 4

So far, our results show that those high (vs. low) in SDO perceive less agentic mind in organizations, which leads to more lenient moral judgments after corporate misconduct. Study 4 sought to experimentally test the motivational aspect of our hypothesized model: that people high in SDO are motivated to perceive higher agency in organizations, which subsequently reduces how harshly they judge a wrongdoing organization.

To do so, we manipulated whether the immoral organizational behavior was hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating. All vignettes used in Studies 1-3 described organizational misconduct in which the wrongdoing organizations were harming those with less power, which is arguably hierarchy-enhancing behavior. Study 4 manipulated this factor by describing organizational misconduct which either harmed a low-status group at the benefit of a high-status group (hierarchy-enhancing), which would strengthen existing hierarchies, or helped

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a low-status group (hierarchy-attenuating), which would threaten the stability of the social hierarchy those high in SDO are motivated to maintain.

Method

A sample size of 700 subjects was decided upon *a priori* based on the heuristic that 350 per condition is sufficient to detect small effect sizes, and therefore in a moderated mediation model sufficient to detect medium effect sizes. A post-hoc sensitivity analysis of a simple mediation analysis found that our observed effect sizes would be observable with 90% at $N = 400$; as such we are confident our analyses are sufficiently powered.

Participants were recruited on TurkPrime for a 2 minute study and were compensated \$0.40. Two pairs of participants had identical IP addresses and were removed, leaving a final $N = 696$ (their inclusion does not affect the results). After providing informed consent, participants responded to the SDO₇ scale ($\alpha = .94$) and were assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions. In the hierarchy-enhancing condition, participants read about a hypothetical consulting company which had overcharged a non-profit community health clinic (but not other for-profit pharmaceutical companies) \$10,000, and paid that money to company shareholders. In the hierarchy-attenuating condition, the same company instead overcharged a for-profit pharmaceutical company (but not other non-profit clinics) \$10,000, and donated that money to a free medical clinic for the poor.

After the manipulation participants rated the company on perceived agency ($\alpha = .90$) and experience ($\alpha = .91$) using the items from Studies 1a, 1b, and 3. Participants then responded to a 3-item measures of punishment ($\alpha = .97$) which asked how “harshly,” “strongly,” and “severe” a punishment the consulting company should receive on a scale from 1 (*no punishment*) to 7 (*very*

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[harsh/strong/severe] punishment). Participants were subsequently asked how large a fine the consulting company should receive (11 points, in \$2000 increments, from “No Fine” to “\$20,000 or more”). The mind perception items were administered first due to the item order effects observed in Study 3, as placing them after the punishment/fine items would likely have increased perceived agentic mind and potentially inflated the chance of observing our proposed mediation model with agentic mind mediating the relationship between hierarchy condition and punishment. After participants provided basic demographic questions, we debriefed participants to clarify that the vignettes were fictional. For complete materials and items, please see Online Materials⁴.

Results

Perceived mind. Relative to the hierarchy-attenuating (HA) condition, participants in the hierarchy-enhancing (HE) condition attributed the company less agentic mind ($M_{HA} = 5.29$, $M_{HE} = 4.91$, $t(676.61) = 3.01$, $d_{cohen} = 0.23$, $p = 0.003$) and less experiential mind ($M_{HA} = 4.58$, $M_{HE} = 3.88$, $t(690.02) = 5.02$, $d_{cohen} = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$). There was no association between SDO and agency across conditions ($\beta = -0.05$, 95% CI [-0.13, 0.02], $p = 0.170$), and SDO did not interact with hierarchy condition in predicting perceived agency ($\beta = 0.04$, 95% CI [-0.04, 0.11], $p = 0.336$).

Punishment. Relative to the hierarchy-attenuating (HA) condition, participants in the hierarchy-enhancing (HE) condition supported greater punishment ($M_{HA} = 4.12$, $M_{HE} = 5.54$, $t(620.70) = -13.47$, $d_{cohen} = -1.02$, $p < 0.001$) and a larger fine ($M_{HA} = \$7757.93$, $M_{HE} = \$14418.34$, $t(692.46) = -13.85$, $d_{cohen} = -1.05$, $p < 0.001$). The associations between SDO and

⁴ https://osf.io/muj54/?view_only=2c348f64a1614b0a814cc034f506b4cb

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organizational punishment/fine were qualified by an interaction for both punishment ($\beta = 0.24$, 95% CI [0.17, 0.30], $p < 0.001$) and fine amount ($b = 1250.45$, 95% CI [788.86, 1712.05], $p < 0.001$). A simple slopes analysis revealed that in the HE condition, SDO was negatively associated with punishment ($\beta = -0.23$, 95% CI [-0.32, -0.14], $p < 0.001$) and the fine ($b = -1904.33$, 95% CI [-2545.79, -1262.88], $p < 0.001$). Conversely, in the HA condition SDO was positively associated with punishment ($\beta = 0.25$, 95% CI [0.15, 0.34], $p < 0.001$) and unassociated with the fine ($b = 596.57$, 95% CI [-67.37, 1260.51], $p = 0.078$). These results indicate that participants higher in SDO were more lenient toward the hierarchy-enhancing company, but less lenient toward the hierarchy-attenuating company.

The association between punishment and agency was qualified by three significant two-way interactions. First, agency interacted with hierarchy condition ($\beta = -0.11$, 95% CI [-0.17, -0.04], $p = 0.001$), such that agency was negatively associated with punishment in the HA condition ($\beta = -0.14$, 95% CI [-0.24, -0.04], $p = 0.005$), and unassociated with punishment in the HE condition ($\beta = 0.07$, 95% CI [-0.01, 0.16], $p = 0.093$). Second, agency interacted with SDO ($\beta = 0.11$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.17], $p < 0.001$), such that SDO was negatively associated with punishment at low levels (-1 SD) of agency ($\beta = -0.10$, 95% CI [-0.19, -0.01], $p = 0.027$) and positively associated with punishment at high levels (+1 SD) of agency ($\beta = 0.11$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.20], $p = 0.012$). Finally, SDO interacted with hierarchy condition ($\beta = 0.22$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.29], $p < 0.001$), such that in the HE condition SDO was negatively associated with punishment ($\beta = -0.22$, 95% CI [-0.31, -0.13], $p < 0.001$), and in the HA condition SDO was positively associated with punishment ($\beta = 0.23$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.32], $p < 0.001$). There was no three-way interaction ($\beta = 0.02$, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.08], $p = 0.629$).

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Figure 2 plots the simple slopes of the punishment-agency association by hierarchy condition and the moderating effect of SDO. As we found a significant interaction between condition and the agency-punishment association, in the moderated mediation model testing the causal effect of hierarchy-enhancing vs. hierarchy-attenuating organizational misconduct on agency attributions and punishment, we allow the mediation effect to vary (i.e., interact) by condition.

Figure 2: Simple slopes from 3-way interaction of SDO x Condition x Agency in predicting Punishment. The following slope lines are significant: At Low SDO the HA slope ($\beta = -0.26, p < 0.001$), at Mean SDO the HA slope ($\beta = -0.14, p = 0.005$), at High SDO the HE slope ($\beta = 0.16, p = 0.012$). Dots are jittered.

Mediation Model. To fully test the hypothesis that SDO influences how participants react to organizational misconduct, we utilized moderated mediation with the condition-punishment relationship mediated by agentic mind and moderated by SDO. Based on the analyses above, we modeled hierarchy condition (HA vs. HE) as the IV, agentic mind as the mediator, punishment as the DV, SDO as a moderator of both agency and condition, and a condition-agency interaction as we found a significant interaction of condition and agency in predicting punishment (Figure 3). We utilized a bias-corrected nonparametric bootstrapping with 5000 simulations through the *mediation* (v 4.5.0) R package to estimate confidence intervals (Imai et al., 2010; Tingley et al., 2014).

We found that the HA-HE condition effect reversed the effect of agency on punishment, and that this effect was significantly moderated by SDO. Specifically, when the organizational transgression was hierarchy-enhancing (vs. hierarchy attenuating), the organization was attributed less agency ($\beta = -0.23, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.38, -0.08], p = 0.002$), and increased punishment ($\beta = 0.91, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.78, 1.05], p < 0.001$). However, because the effect of agency on punishment was reversed across the hierarchy conditions (see analyses above in Punishment section), in the HA condition the average causal mediation effect (indirect effect) was significant and positive ($\beta = 0.03, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.01, 0.08], p = 0.028$) and in the HE condition the indirect effect was significant and negative ($\beta = -0.02, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.04, -0.003], p = 0.023$). These two indirect effect estimates significantly differed across conditions, based on a two-sided *t*-test ($p = 0.004$).

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Interpretatively, this meant that for a hierarchy attenuating wrongdoing organization, increased agency led to decreased punishment; but for a hierarchy enhancing wrongdoing organization, increased agency led to increased punishment.

This pattern was explained by the moderating effect of SDO. For participants high in SDO (+1 SD), the HE condition indirect effect was negative ($\beta = -0.04$, 95% CI [-0.08, -0.02], $p = 0.002$), meaning that agency increased punishment for a hierarchy enhancing organization among those high in SDO (average direct effect: $\beta = 0.45$, 95% CI [0.27, 0.64], $p < 0.001$). Conversely, for participants low in SDO (-1 SD), the HA condition indirect effect was positive ($\beta = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.12], $p = 0.005$), meaning that agency reduced punishment for a hierarchy attenuating organization (average direct effect: $\beta = 1.37$, 95% CI [1.18, 1.55], $p < 0.001$).

As responses to the fine measure were highly trimodal, therefore violating normality assumptions of mediation analyses, we analyze and report the results from the mediation model with the fine DV in the supplemental materials.

Overall, these results support the hypothesis that agentic mind perception toward wrongdoing organizations is motivated: for those motivated to attenuate social hierarchies (-1 SD of SDO), greater agency meant less punishment, whereas for those motivated to enhance social hierarchies (+1 SD of SDO), greater agency meant more punishment.

Figure 3: Moderated mediation model. Estimates are standardized. $** p < 0.01$, $*** p < 0.001$.

General Discussion

Across five studies, we find that people high in SDO judge organizational transgressions less harshly due to a motivated tendency to attribute a lower agentic mind to organizations. These results generalized across organizational size and industry, and were not explained by political orientation. Overall, our findings contribute to both literatures on SDO and mind perception.

First, the finding that increased SDO reduces perceived agency toward hierarchy-enhancing organizations provides nuance to the assertion made by social dominance theory that anti-egalitarians favor hierarchy-enhancing organizations because they are “dominant.” What attributions of dominance mean psychologically, especially in the context of

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corporate misconduct, invites further explication in light of the fact that agency trends in the opposition direction one would predict if agency were the same as that ability to be dominant, and that hierarchy-attenuating wrongdoing organizations are attributed *more* agency than hierarchy-enhancing wrongdoing organizations in Study 4. Our findings suggest that agency attributions may relate more to perceptions of threat to the stability of the social hierarchy (i.e., hierarchy-attenuation) than to perceptions of dominance. This is because, while HA wrongdoing organizations were higher in agency, those high in SDO assigned greater punishment for wrongdoing.

Second, this research also has implications for how people high in SDO judge group-level unethical behaviors. Individuals high in SDO are more likely to make unethical behaviors themselves, adhere to conventions perceived as established by authority and society, and support unethical, self-serving leaders (Son Hing et al., 2007). However, this work is the first to examine how SDO influences judgments of unethical behaviors by organizational entities, and suggests that reactions to group-level unethical behavior are largely determined by how that behavior aligns with hierarchy-enhancing motives.

Third, our findings suggest that ideological motives play an important role in affecting the process of mind perception. Although some research has shown that individual differences can influence mind perception (e.g., persistent low feelings of control increase attribution of human qualities to non-living things; Waytz, Cacioppo, et al., 2010), much of research on mind perception has focused on situational or contextual factors without examining the role of ideological differences. While past research finds that agency is associated with greater condemnation and punishment for wrongdoing individuals and organizations (Schein & Gray,

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2018; Tang & Gray, 2018), we find that this relationship reverses for hierarchy-attenuating wrongdoing for those motivated to attenuate social hierarchies. Our findings suggest that when people, governments, and courts judge organizations after wrongdoing, their ideological leanings would influence their judgments of the organizations through motivated mind perception processes.

Finally, we found that SDO was associated with a reduced difference between agency and experience for organizations, suggesting that ideology can influence how closely agency and experience go hand in hand. For example, it is possible that those high in SDO simply perceive one overall mind when judging organizational targets, whereas those low on SDO more strongly differentiate between agency and experience. To our knowledge, we are the first to examine how the *difference* between the dimensions of mind perception affect moral judgment, and future research may wish to examine this pattern and its implications for moral judgments.

Limitations and future directions

Although our work shows that SDO is an important factor that influences mind perception and subsequent judgments of organizational misconduct, we note several limitations in this initial work. First, although we were interested in how SDO influences mind perception and moral judgments in adults, our studies utilized online samples. Although this sort of convenience sample allows us to reach participants across the country, future research can examine how young adults, such as college students, may show similar or different results.

We also note the statistically insignificant association between SDO and agency in Studies 3 and 4, the two studies where mind perception is measured in the context of a moral transgression. This may be due to the large causal effect of item order on agency, as we observed

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the hypothesized SDO-agency relationship only when the immorality items came first in Study 3. However, Study 4 suggests that while SDO isn't directly correlated with agency in the context of a moral transgression, SDO determines whether agency is associated with more or less punishment in the context of hierarchy-enhancing motives. Study 4 also found large effects of HA vs. HE condition on all the dependent variables, which may have muddled the ability to observe the raw and small linear associations observed between SDO and agency in Studies 1a-b where no moral transgression was present, as SDO was measured prior to the intervention and DVs in Study 4.

Lastly, our research examined how SDO, one type of ideology, influences mind perception. However, society is replete with different ideologies that motivate us to see the world in different ways. Future work can thus examine how other ideological differences, such as religion and right-wing authoritarianism, influence mind perception. Future research may thus delve deeper into the ways in which ideological motives can alter the relationship between mind perception and moral judgment in similar or divergent ways.

Understanding why individuals are permissive of corporate misconduct is a pressing social and scientific question. We find that one such factor predicting leniency is anti-egalitarian attitudes: as a result of how someone perceives the mental composition of the organization, the more someone believes that stratified social hierarchies are good, the more lenient that individual will be toward corporate misconduct. By integrating theoretical work across political and moral psychology, we advance our understanding of why some individuals are tolerant of corporate misconduct and lay the groundwork for future interventions designed to reduce anti-egalitarians' acceptance toward such behavior.

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Conflicts of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Contributions

Jim Sidanius sadly passed away during this research, on June 29th, 2021. Jim oversaw all the studies presented herein, and reviewed/approved early drafts of this manuscript and the authorship order. All authors contributed to the design of the studies and 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.

Ethics

All studies were reviewed and approved by Harvard University’s Institutional Review Board. All participants gave informed consent to participate.

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Supplemental Materials

Study 4 Mediation Supplemental Analyses

Participants' responses to the fine measurement, where they were asked how much the transgressing organization should be fined in \$2,000 increments, were highly trimodal. See Figure S1 for distribution.

Figure S1: Histogram of responses to fine measure in Study 4, $N = 696$.

To formally examine concerns over non-normality, we reran the second model used in the moderated mediation analysis from Study 4 with fine (mean-centered), rather than punishment, as the dependent variable. Table S1 presents the regression results.

Table S1: Predicting Organizational Fine

<i>Predictors</i>	Fine_cen		
	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>CI</i>	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	-43.51	-505.95 – 418.93	0.853
Condition Sum [1]	-3202.36	-3664.80 – -2739.92	<0.001
Agency std	-615.76	-1088.05 – -143.47	0.011
SDO std	-718.78	-1180.80 – -256.77	0.002
Condition Sum [1] *	-383.28	-855.57 – 89.01	0.112
Agency std			
Condition Sum [1] * SDO	1261.28	799.27 – 1723.30	<0.001
std			
Agency std * SDO std	-120.76	-566.75 – 325.23	0.595
(Condition Sum [1] *	471.44	25.45 – 917.43	0.038
Agency std) * SDO std			
Observations	696		
R ² / R ² adjusted	0.270 / 0.263		

We then examined the distribution of residuals from the regression to see if they met the assumption of normality. Figures S2a and S2b display the distribution of residuals. Both of these plots provide clear evidence that the fine dependent variable is not normally distributed and unsuitable for linear regression. For comparison, Figures S3a and S3b display the same residual plots for the regression where punishment is the dependent variable, and there we find evidence for normally distributed residuals. These concerns aside, the mediation results examining the

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mediation reported for Study 4, but with fine and the dependent variable rather than punishment, can be found in Table S2 below.

Figure S2a: Residual density plot of regression predicting fine.

Figure S2b: Residual QQ plot of regression predicting fine.

Figure S3a: Residual density plot of regression predicting punishment used in Study 4 mediation model.

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Figure S3b: Residual QQ plot of regression predicting punishment used in Study 4 mediation model.

Table S2: Moderated Mediation Results with Organizational Fine DV

Causal Mediation Analysis

Nonparametric Bootstrap Confidence Intervals with the BCa Method

(Inference Conditional on the Covariate Values Specified in `covariates`)

	Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value
ACME (control)	2.31e+02	4.37e+01	544.85	0.025 *
ACME (treated)	5.38e+01	-6.72e+01	238.11	0.446
ADE (control)	6.49e+03	5.63e+03	7492.84	<2e-16 ***
ADE (treated)	6.31e+03	5.45e+03	7324.75	<2e-16 ***
Total Effect	6.54e+03	5.69e+03	7544.10	<2e-16 ***
Prop. Mediated (control)	3.54e-02	6.64e-03	0.08	0.025 *
Prop. Mediated (treated)	8.23e-03	-1.02e-02	0.04	0.446
ACME (average)	1.43e+02	2.55e+01	341.75	0.027 *
ADE (average)	6.40e+03	5.56e+03	7411.60	<2e-16 ***
Prop. Mediated (average)	2.18e-02	4.01e-03	0.05	0.027 *

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Sample Size Used: 696

Simulations: 5000