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## Reports

Why do we punish groups? High entitativity promotes moral suspicion<sup>☆</sup>Anna-Kaisa Newheiser<sup>\*</sup>, Takuya Sawaoka, John F. Dovidio

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## ABSTRACT

People typically take a moral deservingness perspective when deciding on appropriate punishment for intentional wrongdoings committed by individuals. Considerably less is known about how people reason about wrongdoings committed by groups, even though there are fundamental differences in how people perceive individuals versus groups. The present research examined perceived entitativity, the degree to which a group is perceived to be a unified, single agent, as a potential determinant of moral reasoning about transgressions committed by groups. We found that participants recommended more severe punishments for high entitativity (vs. low entitativity) perpetrator groups, particularly in the presence of morally mitigating circumstances that typically lessen punitiveness. This effect was mediated by perceptions of greater moral accountability in high-entitativity groups. Thus, justice is not equal for all groups. Implications for retributive justice and the criminal justice system are discussed.

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## Introduction

A wealth of research has examined people's judgments of immoral acts committed by individuals, focusing on intuitions about what is and is not moral (Haidt, 2001) and on motivations to punish wrongdoers (Darley & Pittman, 2003). Considerably less is known about how people reason about transgressions committed by groups. Indeed, the majority of research on moral psychology has taken an individualist approach, treating the individual as the fundamental unit of moral value and focusing on principles of individual rights as guidelines for moral judgment (Haidt, 2008). However, there are fundamental differences in how people perceive, process information about, and interact with individuals as compared to groups (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; Wildschut, Pinter, Vevea, Insko, & Schopler, 2003). Moreover, some groups are routinely evaluated more negatively than others, with low-status groups facing discrimination cross-culturally (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). For instance, Black Americans are judged more harshly in legal contexts and incarcerated at substantially higher rates than White Americans (Hurwitz & Peffley, 1997), indicating that justice is not equal for all. In the present research, we examined the hypothesis that, independent of the social context of specific group memberships, a group's perceived structure may impact people's moral judgments of transgressions committed by the group. We focused specifically on perceived entitativity, the degree to which a group is perceived to be a

unified, single agent as opposed to a mere collection of individuals (Campbell, 1958; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996), as a determinant of moral reasoning about group transgressions.

Research on retributive justice has provided considerable evidence that people take a "just deserts" or moral deservingness perspective when deciding on appropriate punishment for intentional wrongdoing (Carlsmith, 2008; Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Darley, Carlsmith, & Robinson, 2000; Hamilton & Rytina, 1980; Roberts & Gebotys, 1989). According to this perspective, wrongdoers deserve to be punished proportionately to the amount of harm caused by the offense (Darley & Pittman, 2003). Further, mitigating circumstances, such as the reason why the offense was committed, play a major role in determining adults', and even children's, judgments of punishment deservingness (Carlsmith et al., 2002; Darley, Klosson, & Zanna, 1978; Woolfolk, Doris, & Darley, 2006). For example, an immoral act committed for selfish reasons (e.g., for one's personal benefit) is perceived as a greater transgression, and therefore as more deserving of punishment, than the same act committed for selfless reasons (e.g., for others' benefit; Carlsmith et al., 2002).

In addition to considerations regarding punishment deservingness and mitigating circumstances, factors related to group perception in general are likely to impact reasoning about the morality of groups' actions. A key property of groups is their degree of perceived entitativity, the extent to which groups are seen to have the nature of real entities (Campbell, 1958) and to possess unity, coherence, and internal organization (Abelson, Dasgupta, Park, & Banaji, 1998; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). High-entitativity groups are typically perceived more similarly to individuals than to low-entitativity groups (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996), indicating that high-entitativity groups (unlike low-entitativity groups) are perceived as unified, single agents capable of intentional action (O'Laughlin & Malle, 2002).

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Perceptions of high entitativity are associated with a range of negative intergroup responses (e.g., increased stereotyping; Spencer-Rodgers, Hamilton, & Sherman, 2007). High-entitativity groups are perceived to be more capable of engaging in negative behaviors (e.g., retaliation) and less capable of engaging in positive behaviors (e.g., collaboration) than low-entitativity groups (Dasgupta, Banaji, & Abelson, 1999). Perhaps relatedly, people are more willing to condone retaliation against members of high-entitativity (vs. low-entitativity) outgroups perceived to have offended the ingroup, even when the outgroup members in question were not personally part of the conflict (termed “vicarious retribution”; Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson, & Schmader, 2006; Stenstrom, Lickel, Denson, & Miller, 2008).

The consistently negative responses to high-entitativity groups, and the associated perception of threat (Abelson et al., 1998), suggest that people may be inclined to view high-entitativity groups’ actions with suspicion, leading them to judge a high-entitativity group’s behaviors as less moral and more deserving of punishment than those of a low-entitativity group. High-entitativity groups are perceived not merely as cohesive but also as actively carrying out plans to achieve their collective objectives (Abelson et al., 1998; Brewer, Hong, & Li, 2004; Rutchick, Hamilton, & Sack, 2008). Such perceptions may lead people to assume that high-entitativity groups’ actions result from an underlying group-level disposition, and, indeed, people interpret high-entitativity groups’ behaviors more dispositionally than those of low-entitativity groups (Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998). Dispositional attributions are generally associated with more negative responses (Chiu, Dweck, Tong, & Fu, 1997; Miller, Burgoon, & Hall, 2007). Taken together, these findings suggest that people may judge transgressions committed by high-entitativity groups more harshly than those committed by low-entitativity groups.

As an initial test of this hypothesis, we conducted a pilot study in which participants ( $N = 83$ ; 58% female; mean age = 35.33,  $SD = 13.23$ ) were given information about the fictional group “Greels.” We manipulated Greels’ entitativity by varying physical and behavioral similarity among group members (following Dasgupta et al., 1999). Specifically, in the High Entitativity condition, Greels were the same color and engaged in collective behaviors (e.g., having a group conversation), whereas in the Low Entitativity condition Greels were of different colors and presented as acting individually (e.g., each Greel engaged in a different task). A manipulation check confirmed that participants perceived Greels as more entitative in the High Entitativity condition. Participants read about a series of “behaviors unique to the Greels” and were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that each behavior was morally acceptable (1 = *disagree strongly* to 7 = *agree strongly*;  $\alpha = .77$ ). The behaviors (e.g., requiring left-handed children to become right-handed) were designed to tap into foundational moral values (Haidt & Joseph, 2004) and to elicit a relatively wide range of moral acceptability ratings. As predicted, moral acceptability was lower when entitativity was high ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ), compared to low ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ),  $t(81) = 1.99$ ,  $p = .050$ ,  $d = 0.44$ . That is, participants perceived the same behaviors to be less morally acceptable when they were performed by a group higher in entitativity.

Given that people are motivated to punish individual transgressors more harshly in the absence (vs. presence) of mitigating circumstances (e.g., when a transgression is committed for selfish, as opposed to selfless, reasons; Carlsmith, 2008; Carlsmith et al., 2002; Darley et al., 2000) and that, as established by our pilot study, people perceive high-entitativity groups to be morally suspicious, we propose that these two factors combine to influence the degree to which people are motivated to punish group transgressors. Specifically, we suggest that both mitigating circumstances and a perpetrator group’s level of entitativity affect punishment severity, with the absence of mitigating circumstances and higher entitativity both eliciting harsher punishment. However, we also expected these factors to interact. Although we expected that high-entitativity groups perceived to have committed a transgression for selfish reasons

may receive the harshest punishment, we specifically predicted that entitativity would have a larger impact on punitiveness when the transgression was committed for selfless reasons (i.e., in the presence of mitigating circumstances). The effect of mitigating circumstances on punitiveness is large (Carlsmith et al., 2002), and additional factors may thus be less relevant to people’s reasoning about appropriate punishment in the absence of mitigating circumstances—that is, when the circumstances do not justify a lesser punishment. However, when mitigating circumstances are present, allowing for more variability in judgments of punishment deservingness, perceptions of entitativity are likely to be more central in determining people’s responses to transgressions committed by groups.

To examine these predictions, in the present research we presented participants with a description of a crime committed by a high- or low-entitativity group either in the presence or absence of mitigating circumstances (for selfless vs. selfish reasons, respectively). Expanding the entitativity manipulation employed in the pilot study, we operationalized a more complete definition of entitativity that characterized a high-entitativity group as a coherent, organized team able to intentionally pursue collective goals. Going beyond notions of cohesiveness, unity, and internal organization (Campbell, 1958; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996), this definition also encompassed the idea that high-entitativity groups are perceived as unified, single agents (Dasgupta et al., 1999; Lakens & Stel, 2011; Welbourne, 1999).

In addition, we tested the prediction that entitativity may impact punitiveness because higher entitativity elicits perceptions of greater moral accountability in the perpetrator group. It is likely easier to perceive a tightly-knit team of collaborators, as opposed to a loose aggregate of independent individuals, as collectively accountable for a wrongdoing. Indeed, members of high-entitativity groups are perceived to be collectively responsible for offenses perpetrated by their group, even when they did not personally participate in the wrongdoing (Denson, Lickel, Curtis, Stenstrom, & Ames, 2006; Stenstrom et al., 2008). Accordingly, high-entitativity groups may be perceived as distinctively malevolent and particularly morally accountable for wrongdoings (Malle, 2010; O’Laughlin & Malle, 2002). Given that perceived accountability is an important precursor to the motivation to punish a perpetrator (Darley & Pittman, 2003), we anticipated that heightened perceptions of moral accountability would mediate the joint effects of entitativity and mitigating circumstances on punishment severity.

## Method

### Participants

Three hundred and nineteen participants (55% female; mean age = 34.26,  $SD = 10.77$ , range: 18–60) were recruited via an online research participation service hosted by a university in return for a chance to win a gift certificate.

### Procedure and measures

Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a Mitigating Circumstances (present vs. absent)  $\times$  Entitativity (low vs. high) between-subjects factorial design. Participants were told that the study examined people’s opinions about punishment for various types of crimes and read a description of a crime committed by a group of four corporate executives. The descriptions were taken from Carlsmith et al. (2002, Study 1, Scenario Version B) and adapted to describe a group (rather than an individual) as the perpetrator. In each case, the perpetrator group was guilty of embezzling “hundreds of thousands of dollars” from their employer.

In the Absence of Mitigating Circumstances condition, the group embezzled for their personal benefit: “The reason they needed money was for debts they had run up with loan sharks. They had a habit of betting and gambling together and had started to run severe

losses. To keep up this habit they had borrowed from loan sharks, while continuing to maintain an extravagant style of living.” In contrast, in the Presence of Mitigating Circumstances condition, the group embezzled in order to help others in need: “The reason they needed money was for people who worked in the corporation’s factories overseas. Many of the workers were paid a below cost of living wage, and they arranged that managers in several of these factories received the profits from the surpluses to give to those most in need among the workers.” (See Carlsmith et al., 2002, for complete details of this manipulation.)

In the High Entitativity condition, the perpetrator group was described as follows: “The accountants described Jeff, Brian, Philip, and Richard as a tightly-knit team that was organized in a way that made the group very efficient in achieving its goals. Each member seemed to have a particular role in organizing the crime, which allowed the group to solve problems highly effectively. The fact that Jeff, Brian, Philip, and Richard had common goals and would face the same consequences if caught seemed to have made belonging to this group quite important for each of them.” In the Low Entitativity condition, the perpetrator group was instead portrayed as follows: “The accountants described Jeff, Brian, Philip, and Richard as loosely connected individuals who barely knew each other. They were not organized into a team but rather each individual seemed to be working toward his own specific goals. Regardless of this seeming lack of team work, the crime was accomplished highly effectively. The fact that Jeff, Brian, Philip, and Richard had common goals and would face the same consequences if caught seemed to have made almost no difference to them.” Accordingly, the Entitativity manipulation was designed to include several key aspects of the multidimensional construct of entitativity, including having the nature of a true entity, internal organization and agency, coherence, collective goals, and importance of group membership (Campbell, 1958; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; Lickel et al., 2000; see Welbourne, 1999, for a similar manipulation).

After reading about the crime, participants responded to a series of measures of mediators, dependent variables, and manipulation checks. First, representing a potential mediator, three items assessed the degree to which participants perceived the perpetrator group as *morally accountable* for committing the crime (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*). The items were: “To what extent is the group morally accountable for committing the crime?”; “To what extent should the group be morally condemned for committing the crime?”; and “To what extent is the group morally responsible for committing the crime?” ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

Next, we assessed *emotional reactions* to the crime for exploratory purposes. Participants were asked: “To what extent did reading about the crime make you feel: moral outrage, anger, disgust, contempt, curiosity, empathy, surprise, anxiety” (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*). Prior research has found a mediating role for moral outrage in the relationship between mitigating circumstances and punishment severity (Carlsmith et al., 2002), and for anger in the relationship between entitativity and the likelihood of retribution against a group (Stenstrom et al., 2008). Our aim was to examine moral accountability, moral outrage, and anger as simultaneous mediators of the joint impact of Mitigating Circumstances and Entitativity on punishment severity. We expected that moral accountability would emerge as a significant mediator even when the potential effects of moral outrage and anger were taken into account. The remaining emotions were fillers.

Participants then completed the main dependent measure of *recommended punishment*, using a 13-point single-item sentencing scale commonly employed in prior research on retributive justice (Carlsmith et al., 2002; Darley et al., 2000; Robinson & Darley, 1997; Weiner, Graham, & Reyna, 1997). Participants were asked: “In your opinion, which of the following is the most appropriate sentence for this crime?” The response scale ranged from *not guilty* to *life sentence*, with specific sentence durations (e.g., 2 months in prison, 7 years in

prison) specified in between (see the note for Fig. 1 for the full response scale).

Next, participants completed two manipulation checks, both employing a 7-point response scale (1 = *disagree strongly/not at all* to 7 = *agree strongly/very*). Four items developed for the purposes of the present study assessed perceptions of the perpetrator group’s level of entitativity. The items were: “The group is a high-performing team”; “Members of the group are efficient when they work together”; “The group is well coordinated”; and “The group is tightly-knit” ( $\alpha = .87$ ). Six items measured perceptions of the harmfulness of the crime: “How serious was the crime?”; “How harmful was the crime?”; “How much did the crime harm the corporation?”; “How much material damage did the crime cause?”; “How concerned should the corporation be about someone else committing a similar crime?”; and “How harmful is this type of crime in general?” ( $\alpha = .86$ ). Following Carlsmith et al. (2002), we expected that the absence (vs. presence) of mitigating circumstances would lead participants to perceive the crime as more harmful. Thus, as in Carlsmith et al. (2002), ratings of perceived harmfulness served as a manipulation check for Mitigating Circumstances. Participants finally provided basic demographic information (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity) and were debriefed.

### Preliminary study

Perceptions of entitativity may be sensitive to information about a group’s behaviors even in the absence of information about the group’s structure or cohesiveness (e.g., Ip, Chiu, & Wan, 2006). In addition, the Entitativity manipulation check we employed in the main study did not assess each aspect of the multidimensional construct of entitativity. We therefore conducted a preliminary study to ensure that the description of the presence or absence of mitigating circumstances did not interfere with the entitativity manipulation.

In the preliminary study, an independent sample of 225 participants (71% female; mean age = 38.38,  $SD = 13.73$ , range: 18–78) recruited via the same online research participation service as participants in the main study were randomly assigned to conditions in the Mitigating Circumstances (present vs. absent)  $\times$  Entitativity (low vs. high) between-subjects design. Participants’ task was to respond to an expanded version of the entitativity manipulation check (1 = *disagree strongly* to 7 = *agree strongly*). In addition to the four items employed in the main study, we included the following seven items designed to capture additional dimensions of entitativity: “The group is important to each member”; “Members of the group are tightly connected”; “Members of the group interact often with one another”; “Members of the group are similar to one another”; “The group is working collectively toward a shared goal”; “What happens to one member of the group also impacts the other group members”; and “Members of the group depend on one another.”

We conducted separate (Mitigating Circumstances: present vs. absent)  $\times$  2 (Entitativity: low vs. high) between-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVAs) on the four items developed for the main study ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and on the additional items ( $\alpha = .92$ ). Regarding the four-item measure, we found a large main effect of Entitativity,  $F(1, 221) = 278.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .56$ . There was no main effect of Mitigating Circumstances,  $p = .125$ , and no interaction,  $p = .492$ . Perceived entitativity was substantially higher in the High (vs. Low) Entitativity condition both in the presence ( $M_{\text{high}} = 6.11$ ,  $SD_{\text{high}} = 0.97$ ;  $M_{\text{low}} = 4.00$ ,  $SD_{\text{low}} = 1.31$ ) and the absence ( $M_{\text{high}} = 6.40$ ,  $SD_{\text{high}} = 0.60$ ;  $M_{\text{low}} = 4.11$ ,  $SD_{\text{low}} = 0.98$ ) of mitigating circumstances.

Regarding the seven-item measure, we again found a large main effect of Entitativity,  $F(1, 221) = 283.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .56$ . The weak main effect of Mitigating Circumstances approached significance,  $F(1, 221) = 3.84$ ,  $p = .051$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .02$ , such that perceived entitativity was slightly higher in the absence ( $M = 5.35$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) versus the presence ( $M = 5.06$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ) of mitigating circumstances. More importantly, the interaction was nonsignificant,  $p = .365$ . Perceived entitativity was

substantially higher in the High (vs. Low) Entitativity condition both in the presence ( $M_{\text{high}}=6.02$ ,  $SD_{\text{high}}=0.86$ ;  $M_{\text{low}}=4.00$ ,  $SD_{\text{low}}=1.26$ ) and the absence ( $M_{\text{high}}=6.38$ ,  $SD_{\text{high}}=0.61$ ;  $M_{\text{low}}=4.13$ ,  $SD_{\text{low}}=0.99$ ) of mitigating circumstances.

In addition, principal components analysis with Oblimin rotation on the eleven entitativity items revealed that all items loaded on a single factor, explaining 68% of the variance ( $\alpha=.95$ ). A (Mitigating Circumstances: present vs. absent)  $\times$  2 (Entitativity: low vs. high) ANOVA on the full 11-item measure revealed a large main effect of Entitativity,  $F(1, 221)=311.29$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.59$ , a nonsignificant main effect of Mitigating Circumstances,  $p=.059$ , and no interaction,  $p=.387$ . Perceived entitativity was substantially higher in the High (vs. Low) Entitativity condition both in the presence ( $M_{\text{high}}=6.05$ ,  $SD_{\text{high}}=0.88$ ;  $M_{\text{low}}=4.00$ ,  $SD_{\text{low}}=1.24$ ) and the absence ( $M_{\text{high}}=6.39$ ,  $SD_{\text{high}}=0.56$ ;  $M_{\text{low}}=4.12$ ,  $SD_{\text{low}}=0.89$ ) of mitigating circumstances.

In summary, these results established that the Mitigating Circumstances manipulation did not substantially interfere with the Entitativity manipulation. In addition, the finding that the four entitativity items employed in the main study loaded on the same factor with the seven additional items employed in the preliminary study lent validity to the four-item measure.

## Results

### Manipulation checks

In order to test the effectiveness of the Entitativity manipulation, we conducted a 2 (Mitigating Circumstances: present vs. absent)  $\times$  2 (Entitativity: low vs. high) between-subjects ANOVA on ratings of the perpetrator group's entitativity, which revealed the expected main effect of Entitativity,  $F(1, 314)=189.90$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.38$ . Participants perceived greater entitativity in the High Entitativity condition ( $M=6.10$ ,  $SD=1.02$ ) than the Low Entitativity condition ( $M=4.36$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ), confirming the success of the manipulation. As anticipated, there was no main effect of Mitigating Circumstances,  $p=.934$ , and no interaction,  $p=.226$ . Perceived entitativity was substantially higher in the High (vs. Low) Entitativity condition both in the presence ( $M_{\text{high}}=6.16$ ,  $SD_{\text{high}}=1.00$ ;  $M_{\text{low}}=4.28$ ,  $SD_{\text{low}}=1.29$ ) and the absence ( $M_{\text{high}}=6.02$ ,  $SD_{\text{high}}=1.04$ ;  $M_{\text{low}}=4.44$ ,  $SD_{\text{low}}=1.15$ ) of mitigating circumstances.

In order to test the effectiveness of the Mitigating Circumstances manipulation, we conducted an analogous ANOVA on the crime's perceived harmfulness. This analysis revealed a main effect of Mitigating Circumstances,  $F(1, 315)=29.14$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.09$ , as well as a weaker main effect of Entitativity,  $F(1, 315)=3.98$ ,  $p=.047$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.01$ , and a significant interaction,  $F(1, 315)=10.05$ ,  $p=.002$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.03$ . Analyses of simple effects showed that, within the Low

Entitativity condition, participants perceived the crime to be more harmful in the absence ( $M=5.51$ ,  $SD=0.96$ ) than in the presence ( $M=4.47$ ,  $SD=1.27$ ) of mitigating circumstances,  $t(315)=-3.64$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $d=0.41$ . In contrast, within the High Entitativity condition, the absence ( $M=5.37$ ,  $SD=0.94$ ) versus presence ( $M=5.09$ ,  $SD=1.14$ ) of mitigating circumstances did not affect perceived harmfulness,  $p=.405$ . Thus, although Mitigating Circumstances had the intended effect on the crime's perceived harmfulness, harmfulness was also increased by high entitativity in the perpetrator group.

### Main analysis

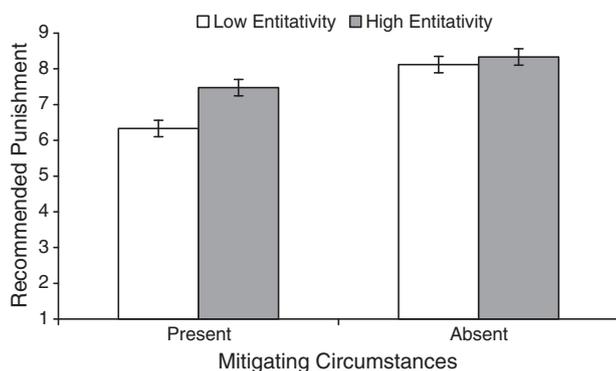
To test the hypothesis that high entitativity would result in harsher punishment particularly in the presence of mitigating circumstances, we conducted a 2 (Mitigating Circumstances: present vs. absent)  $\times$  2 (Entitativity: low vs. high) between-subjects ANOVA on recommended punishment. This analysis revealed a main effect of Entitativity,  $F(1, 315)=8.79$ ,  $p=.003$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.03$ , such that participants recommended a harsher sentence for high-entitativity groups ( $M=7.89$ ,  $SD=1.94$ ) than for low-entitativity groups ( $M=7.26$ ,  $SD=2.36$ ). There was also a main effect of Mitigating Circumstances,  $F(1, 315)=33.37$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.10$ . Replicating prior findings (e.g., Carlsmith et al., 2002), recommended punishment was harsher in the absence ( $M=8.22$ ,  $SD=1.80$ ) than in the presence ( $M=6.92$ ,  $SD=2.33$ ) of mitigating circumstances.

Importantly, the main effects were qualified by a significant interaction,  $F(1, 315)=4.15$ ,  $p=.043$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.01$  (see Fig. 1). Analyses of simple effects showed that in the absence of mitigating circumstances, participants recommended equally severe sentences for high-entitativity groups ( $M=8.33$ ,  $SD=1.66$ ; corresponding to between 3 and 7 years in prison) and low-entitativity groups ( $M=8.12$ ,  $SD=1.93$ ; corresponding to approximately 3 years in prison),  $p=.510$ . In contrast, as predicted, in the presence of mitigating circumstances participants recommended significantly harsher sentences for high-entitativity groups ( $M=7.48$ ,  $SD=2.10$ ; corresponding to between 1 and 3 years in prison) than for low-entitativity groups ( $M=6.33$ ,  $SD=2.43$ ; corresponding to between 6 months and 1 year in prison),  $t(315)=-3.52$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $d=0.40$ .

### Mediation

We next examined perceptions of the perpetrator group's moral accountability. A 2 (Mitigating Circumstances: present vs. absent)  $\times$  2 (Entitativity: low vs. high) between-subjects ANOVA on perceived moral accountability revealed a main effect of Mitigating Circumstances,  $F(1, 315)=26.83$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.08$ , indicating that perceived moral accountability was higher in the absence ( $M=6.12$ ,  $SD=1.07$ ) than the presence ( $M=5.49$ ,  $SD=1.16$ ) of mitigating circumstances. There was also a main effect of Entitativity,  $F(1, 315)=6.67$ ,  $p=.010$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.02$ , such that participants perceived high-entitativity groups as more morally accountable ( $M=5.96$ ,  $SD=1.05$ ) than low-entitativity groups ( $M=5.66$ ,  $SD=1.24$ ). The interaction was also significant,  $F(1, 315)=3.93$ ,  $p=.048$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.01$ . Analyses of simple effects indicated that in the absence of mitigating circumstances, participants perceived high-entitativity groups ( $M=6.16$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ) and low-entitativity groups ( $M=6.08$ ,  $SD=1.07$ ) as equally morally accountable,  $p=.671$ . In contrast, in the presence of mitigating circumstances, participants rated high-entitativity groups ( $M=5.76$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ) as more morally accountable than low-entitativity groups ( $M=5.20$ ,  $SD=1.25$ ),  $t(315)=-3.21$ ,  $p=.002$ ,  $d=0.36$ .

We next examined the specific prediction that the interactive effect of Entitativity and Mitigating Circumstances on punishment severity is mediated by perceptions of the perpetrator group's moral accountability. As recommended by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007), we entered the Mitigating Circumstances manipulation as the independent



**Fig. 1.** The interactive effect of mitigating circumstances and the perpetrator group's level of entitativity on recommended punishment. Error bars reflect standard errors of the mean. Response scale: 1 = no liability; 2 = liable but no punishment; 3 = 1 day in prison; 4 = 2 weeks in prison; 5 = 2 months in prison; 6 = 6 months in prison; 7 = 1 year in prison; 8 = 3 years in prison; 9 = 7 years in prison; 10 = 15 years in prison; 11 = 30 years in prison; 12 = life in prison; 13 = death penalty.

variable, the perpetrator group's moral accountability as the mediator, recommended punishment as the dependent variable, and the Entitativity manipulation as the moderator of the effect of Mitigating Circumstances on perceived moral accountability (representing the interactive effect of the two independent variables). In the first step (see Baron & Kenny, 1986), the Entitativity  $\times$  Mitigating Circumstances interaction term significantly predicted recommended punishment,  $b = -0.49$ ,  $SE = 0.25$ ,  $p = .048$ . When moral accountability was included in the model, it was significantly associated with recommended punishment,  $b = 0.49$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ,  $p < .001$ , but the interaction effect was no longer significant,  $b = -0.70$ ,  $SE = 0.45$ ,  $p = .120$ , suggestive of the predicted mediation. We used 5000 bootstrapping resamples to estimate the bias-corrected and accelerated confidence intervals for the indirect effect; if the confidence interval does not contain zero, the indirect effect is significant (Preacher et al., 2007). Perceived moral accountability emerged as a significant mediator both when Entitativity was low,  $M = 0.43$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ , 95% BCa CI [0.20, 0.75],  $p < .001$ , and when Entitativity was high,  $M = 0.19$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ , 95% BCa CI [0.04, 0.39],  $p = 0.044$ .

We also explored moral accountability, moral outrage, and anger as simultaneous mediators. For this analysis, we used a macro designed specifically for testing multiple mediator models (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). We entered the Mitigating Circumstances  $\times$  Entitativity interaction term as the independent variable, moral accountability, moral outrage, and anger as mediators, recommended punishment as the dependent variable, and the main effects of Mitigating Circumstances and Entitativity as covariates. In this model, neither moral outrage,  $M = -0.04$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95% BCa CI [-0.26, 0.02], nor anger,  $M = 0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ , 95% BCa CI [-0.17, 0.33], emerged as significant mediators, but moral accountability did,  $M = -0.20$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ , 95% BCa CI [-0.50, -0.01].

## Discussion

Extensive evidence indicates, with disheartening certainty, that justice is not equal for all. Mere group membership biases people's judgments and evaluations of others, resulting in substantially greater legal sanctions against minority (vs. majority) group members (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1997), a pattern evident across a wide variety of cultures (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In the present research, we asked whether people's perceptions of the nature or structure of groups, independent of the social context of particular group memberships, are sufficient to bias reactions to groups. Indeed, we demonstrated that perceptions of a group's entitativity, the degree to which the group is seen as a single, unified agent (Campbell, 1958; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; O'Laughlin & Malle, 2002), significantly impacted punitiveness. Specifically, participants perceived high-entitativity (vs. low-entitativity) groups as more morally suspicious and more deserving of punishment, particularly when otherwise mitigating circumstances were present. Stated differently, low-entitativity groups benefited more from the presence of mitigating circumstances, indicating that not all groups are the same in the eyes of justice.

We propose that people may react differently to high- and low-entitativity groups' transgressions because high entitativity is distinctively threatening. For this reason, only low-entitativity perpetrator groups get the benefit of the doubt when the situation allows for a lesser punishment (i.e., when mitigating circumstances are present). In the present study, mediation analyses indicated that high-entitativity groups were punished more harshly than low-entitativity groups partially because they were perceived to be more morally accountable for their actions, especially when mitigating circumstances were present. These findings align with Malle's (2010) suggestion that people think of high-entitativity groups as "hyperagents," perceiving them as possessing greater levels of intentionality than low-entitativity groups or even individual agents, and therefore being prone to conceive of high-entitativity groups as uniquely malevolent.

Accordingly, people's initial intuition that a high-entitativity group may pose an elevated level of threat may guide their subsequent reasoning regarding appropriate punishment for wrongdoings perpetrated by the group (see Haidt, 2001, 2007).

Although the present research did not directly examine race or other social categories known to impact people's evaluations of others (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), we suggest that differential perceptions of entitativity may provide a way of interpreting biases that are based on group membership, including the universality of discrimination against minority groups. Minority groups are perceived as more homogeneous than are majority groups (Mullen, 1991), suggesting the possibility that even though particular minority groups differ among cultures, perceptions of high entitativity may help explain the cross-cultural low status of minorities (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). For example, perceived entitativity may mediate the relationship between prejudice and greater punitiveness toward Blacks, relative to Whites (e.g., Goff et al., 2008), a prediction with substantial practical implications for the criminal justice system. More broadly, portraying group defendants as loosely connected individuals may lead to decreased perceptions of accountability and thereby to lower sentences; and conversely, prosecutors may benefit from focusing attention on coordination among defendants to increase their perceived accountability (see also Malle, 2010; Sherman & Percy, 2010).

Future work may also examine the possibility that, as a conceptual flipside of the present findings, entitativity may impact the extent to which group agents are praised for virtuous behavior. For example, due to the moral suspicion elicited by high entitativity, people may be less willing to reward high-entitativity (vs. low-entitativity) groups for morally laudable actions. This may be particularly likely when the context makes the action ambiguous (e.g., when a praiseworthy action is accomplished via immoral means), which may afford a justification to withdraw praise. These predictions have implications for organizations and other collective agents engaged in charitable causes, whose public image may be influenced by perceptions of entitativity.

Finally, we note that interesting questions arise regarding potential differences in people's moral judgments of individual and group agents. Although there are fundamental differences in people's perceptions of individuals and groups, these differences pertain primarily to comparisons between individuals and low-entitativity groups; high-entitativity groups are typically perceived much like individual targets (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). Two competing hypotheses can therefore be derived: It is possible that people's reasoning regarding transgressions (or virtuous acts) committed by individuals and high-entitativity groups function similarly. However, because high-entitativity groups are perceived to possess distinctively high levels of intentionality (O'Laughlin & Malle, 2002), it is also possible that people's judgments of transgressions committed by high-entitativity groups will be more extreme and harsher than their judgments regarding individual agents. Future research may directly contrast these predictions.

In conclusion, the present research demonstrated that people's perceptions of the nature of group agents can have a significant impact on their reasoning about appropriate punishment for transgressions committed by groups. Given that the potential bias engendered by differential perceptions of entitativity is independent of the social context of memberships in particular groups, it may be particularly insidious and difficult to eradicate. Integrating research on group perception, morality, and retributive justice may therefore offer a unique perspective on mechanisms designed to ensure that justice can, in fact, be equal for all.

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