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Righteous or self-righteous anger? Justice sensitivity moderates defensive outrage at a third-party harm-doer

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Abstract

While bystanders' outrage over moral transgressions may represent a genuine desire to restore justice, such expressions can also be self-serving—alleviating guilt and bolstering one's moral status. Four studies examined whether individual differences in observer justice sensitivity (JS_O) moderate the degree to which outrage at third-party harm-doing reflects concerns about one's own moral identity rather than justice per se. Among participants low (vs. high) in JS_O, feelings of guilt predicted greater outrage and desire to punish a corporation's sweatshop labor practices (Studies 1 & 2). Furthermore, affirming one's personal moral identity reduced outrage and support for punishing a corporate harm-doer among those low, but not high in JS_O (Studies 3 & 4). Similar moderation was absent for other forms of justice sensitivity and just world beliefs. Effects were not explained by negative affect, empathy, personal harm, or political orientation. Results suggest that JS_O uniquely differentiates defensive and justice-driven moral outrage. (150/150).

Keywords: Justice Sensitivity; Moral Outrage; Guilt; Third-Party Punishment

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When an energy corporation used violent tactics against Native Americans protesting the construction of an oil pipeline on their sacred lands, people around the world took to social media to express their outrage (Levin & Woolf, 2016). Such expressions of "righteous" or "moral" outrage are generally seen as stemming from a fundamental motivation for justice based on genuine concern for those affected (Lerner 2003; Miller & Ratner, 1996; Montada, 1998).

However, while bystanders' expressions of outrage may represent a genuine desire to restore justice or protect the victimized, recent research suggests that outrage can be self-serving; alleviating guilt and bolstering perceptions of one's moral character (Jordan, Hoffman, Bloom, & Rand, 2016; Rothschild & Keefer, 2017; Rothschild et al. 2013). This raises the possibility that bystander outrage may not necessarily be motivated by concerns with justice *per se*. So how do we differentiate between expressions of outrage reflecting a genuine concern for justice and those driven by less altruistic concerns about personal moral status?

One clue comes from research on individual differences in justice concern. Researchers have identified stable individual differences in people's awareness and reactivity to injustice (Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Maes, & Arbach, 2005). Variation in *justice sensitivity* presumably reflects differences in concern for justice and motivation to see it carried out (Baumert, Rothmund, Thomas, Gollwitzer, & Schmitt, 2013). The present research examines whether variation in justice sensitivity accounts for the differences between more justice-oriented vs. egoistic forms of moral outrage. We draw on recent research to examine whether dispositional differences in justice sensitivity can be used to differentiate those expressing

outrage out of a concern about their own moral identity from those doing so out of a concern for justice.

Moral Outrage

Moral outrage is anger elicited by the perception that someone has violated a moral principle, such as causing illegitimate harm (Batson et al., 2007). Unlike other forms of anger (i.e., *personal anger* and *empathic anger*) moral outrage can be provoked when someone, other than oneself or a close other, is unjustly harmed by a third-party (Thomas et al., 2009). Such outrage directed against a third-party perpetrator can motivate efforts to intervene on behalf of the victimized (Montada & Schneider, 1989; Thomas, 2005; Pagano & Huo, 2007). Because outrage at third-party harm-doing seems to stem from a motive to protect victims of injustice, it is intuitive to interpret outrage as reflecting an underlying concern to see justice upheld.

However, other research has shown that threats to one's moral identity moderate analogous expressions of third-party-directed outrage. For example, when Dutch participants were told that their group's lack of support for immigrants threatened the group's moral (vs. non-moral) status, they subsequently expressed greater outrage toward German harm-doing and *less* outrage about their own group's behavior (Täuber & van Zomeren, 2013). Similarly, when middle-class Americans were told that their group (vs. another cause) was primarily to blame for the suffering of the working-class, they showed greater outrage at working-class harm perpetrated by illegal immigrants and subsequent support for punishing illegal immigrants (Rothschild et al., 2013).

Recently, Rothschild and Keefer (2017) conducted a series of studies suggesting that outrage at third-party harm-doers can be motivated by an underlying desire to alleviate guilt and restore a moral self-image following personal or ingroup immorality. Initial studies found that guilt elicited by reminders of personal or ingroup culpability for labor exploitation

(Study 1) or environmental destruction (Study 2) predicted elevated outrage at a third-party harm-doer (multinational corporations). They also found that the opportunity to express (vs. not express) third-party-directed outrage following reminders of ingroup transgressions reduced felt guilt (Study 2) and bolstered participants' ratings of their own moral character (Study 3). In a final study, researchers manipulated whether participants were given an alternative means of bolstering their moral identity prior to expressing outrage. They found that initially high guilt over the ingroup's impact on sweatshop workers predicted elevated outrage at an exploitative corporation, unless participants were given the opportunity to write about what made them a good person. In other words, affirming one's personal moral identity attenuated participants guilt-induced feelings of outrage at a third-party harm-doer.

Taken together, these studies provide strong evidence that outrage can be driven by feelings of guilt and grounded in concerns with maintaining one's *own* moral identity rather than merely a concern for protecting the victimized or promoting justice.

Of course, just because expressions of outrage *can* be defensive does not mean that all of those voicing outrage at injustice are merely insecure. However the aforementioned research offers limited insight into *whose* outrage is likely to stem from a more or less egoistic motive. The current studies address this gap by testing whether justice sensitivity shapes outrage in reaction to perceived injustice.

Justice Sensitivity

As noted, justice sensitivity is a stable and generalizable individual difference in peoples' readiness to perceive and react to injustice (Baumert & Schmitt, 2016) that ostensibly reflects differential concern for justice (Baumert et al., 2013). Researchers further differentiate between one's sensitivity to being a victim, an outside observer, a passive beneficiary, or a perpetrator of injustice. Empirical evidence confirms that these four

assumed perspectives of justice sensitivity are distinguishable and are reliably assessed with separate scales (Schmitt et al., 2005, 2010).

We focus on research examining justice sensitivity from an *observer* perspective given our interest in outrage over third-party harm-doing. The observer sensitivity scale (Schmitt et al., 2010) assesses the extent to which people are aware of and upset by the perception of injustice perpetrated and experienced by others. Research using this measure finds that justice sensitivity is an important predictor of cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to justice violations. For instance, individuals high in observer sensitivity show more attentiveness to injustice-related words, particularly after exposure to a perpetrated injustice (Baumert, Gollwitzer, Staubach, & Schmitt, 2011). Research also shows that individuals high in observer sensitivity are more likely to adopt egalitarian decision rules when playing economic games. This includes rejecting and punishing a third-party who treats another player unfairly, even when it bears a financial cost to oneself (Fetchenhauer & Huang, 2004; Lotz, Baumert, Schlosser, Gresser, & Fetchenhauer, 2011).

Lotz and colleagues (2011) found justice-sensitive participants' pursuit of so-called *altruistic punishment* of third-party perpetrators was mediated by feelings of moral outrage. Specifically, elevated feelings of outrage at a third-party's unfair allocation of funds to another player led high observer-sensitive participants to punish the offender despite the cost. Similarly, Rothmund, Baumert, and Zinkernagel (2014) found that moral outrage predicted greater bystander support for political protest among observer sensitive participants.

Evidence shows that bystanders high in observer sensitivity display stronger emotional and behavioral reactions to another's experience of unfairness. According to Baumert and colleagues (2013) this pattern is consistent with the notion that justice sensitivity reflects an individual's *genuine* concern for justice and motivation to see justice upheld without regard for egoistic concerns.

The Current Studies

Recent research shows that bystanders' expressions of outrage at another party's injustice does not always reflect a pure concern with justice. This research raises an important distinction: For some, outrage may reflect a commitment to justice; yet for others, outrage may serve as a palliative response to guilt and an underlying concern with maintaining a moral self-image. How then are we to predict who will express defensive as opposed to genuine outrage?

Across four studies, we test a model that uses justice sensitivity to disentangle the motives behind moral outrage against exploitative corporate labor practices. Based on the premise the justice sensitivity reflects genuine concern for justice, the outrage expressed by highly justice-sensitive observers is unlikely to vary based on personal moral status. In contrast, individuals low in justice sensitivity may express outrage more strategically to manage moral status concerns. Accordingly, we predict that justice sensitivity will moderate the relations between moral status and outrage:

> **H1**: *Among participants low (vs. high) in observer justice sensitivity, outrage will be higher to the extent that individuals feel guilty (Studies 1 & 2) or otherwise lack an alternative means of affirming of their personal moral identity (Studies 3 & 4).*

Furthermore, we anticipate that this predicted moderating effect of *observer* sensitivity will be specific to this dimension, which reflects concern over third-party harm-doing. Put formally, we predict that:

> **H2**: *We will find the moderation specified in H1 for observer, but not perpetrator or beneficiary sensitivity (Study 2), victim sensitivity (Study 3), or just world beliefs (Study 4).*

We also test these hypotheses with an eye toward key alternatives, including the possibility that outrage is a function of empathy or negative affect generally (Study 1), perceived

personal harm (Study 3), or political orientation (Study 4). We expect that the predicted patterns of outrage dependent on observer justice sensitivity would remain even after accounting for these variables.

Study 1

Study 1 had two goals. First, we sought to replicate research showing that guilt over one's own contributions to sweatshop labor predicts greater outrage at a corporation's labor exploitation (Rothschild & Keefer, 2017). Following previous research (and employing the same materials), we wanted to show that this relationship was not explained by variations in general negative affect or empathy for the victims. This is important given the hypothesized unique role of guilt and the need to differentiate moral outrage from empathic anger (see Batson, 2011). We did this by statistically controlling for general negative affect and the extent to which participants empathized with the victimized workers. Second, and most importantly, we wanted to provide an initial test of the proposed moderating role of observer justice sensitivity. We predicted that feelings of personal guilt would be especially likely to predict moral outrage for those low (vs. high) in observer sensitivity.

Method

One-hundred and fifty American adults were recruited to participate through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Mturk) service for $.60. [1] Data from 15 cases was excluded from analyses due to failing an attention check (12 participants), and/or spending less than 10 seconds viewing the article on sweatshop labor (6 participants; 3 also failed the attention check). The remaining 135 participants (74 women, 60 men, 1 unidentified) ranged in age from 18 to 69 years ($M = 31.10$, $SD = 9.55$).

All of our studies were described to participants as an examination of personality and attitudes about issues in the news that involved reading short news excerpts and completing questionnaires. Additionally, all studies reminded participants of their right to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time they wished. Data were anonymized to prevent any risk

to participants and all participants who completed each study were provided with a full debriefing explaining the purpose of the study. Study 1 employed a correlational design. All participants were exposed to the same materials described below in the order presented. [2]

Materials and Procedure

Observer justice sensitivity. Participants first completed the 10-item observer justice sensitivity scale (JS_O) designed to assess individual differences in how people respond to "noticing or learning that someone else has been treated unfairly, put at a disadvantage or, used" (Schmitt, Gollwitzer, & Arbach, 2003). Specifically, participants indicated whether they were upset by situations in which others received undue harm or reward (e.g., "It bothers me when someone gets something they don't deserve"; "I am upset when someone is treated worse than others"). Responses were made on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) and were averaged to form composite scores (M = 4.36, SD = .67; α = .81).

Personal culpability induction. Participants then read a fabricated news article used in previous research (Rothschild & Keefer, 2017). The article, entitled "The Exploitation of Workers: A Blight on the Developing World" discussed the "subhuman working conditions" across the developing world, including an "estimated 3 billion people and 250 million children working in so-called sweatshops, characterized by forced labor, substandard pay and hazardous working conditions". The article accented the suffering of sweatshop workers by detailed examples of harmful sweatshop labor practices. Participants then rated the extent to which they believed "workers in developing countries were suffering as a result of sweatshop labor conditions" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). A one-sampled t test revealed that responses (M = 6.36, SD = .97) were significantly higher than scale's midpoint (4), $t(134)$ = 28.40, p < .001, indicating a general acknowledgment that sweatshop workers experience considerable harm.

Participants were then asked to indicate the extent to which they personally engage in five behaviors purported to "directly or indirectly contribute to the perpetuation of sweatshops and forced child labor in the developing world." In an effort to highlight participants' own culpability, we intentionally selected five behaviors assumed to be common for participants in our sample (e.g., "I sometimes buy products without knowing where they were made."; "I rarely ask about working conditions when making a purchase"). Responses were made on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all true for me*, 7 = *very true for me*). Supporting our assumption that the items referred to common behaviors, a one-sample *t* test revealed that composite scores (*M* = 4.28, *SD* = .91; α = .91) were significantly higher than the midpoint (4), $t(134) = 3.53$, $p = .001$.

Guilt. Participants completed the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), a common measure of mood. Participants indicated the degree to which they were currently experiencing 10 positive emotions (*M* = 2.13, *SD* = .63; α = .84) and 10 negative emotions (*M* = 1.90, *SD* = .59; α = .86) using a 5-point scale (1 = *very slightly or not at all*, 5 = *extremely*). Of particular interest for the current study, participants indicated the extent to which they felt "Guilty". Responses to this item comprised our measure of personal guilt (*M* = 2.87, *SD* = 1.17). The composite of the nine remaining negative affect items (*M* = 1.79, *SD* = .66) allowed us to test the specific role of guilt.

Exposure to third-party harm-doing. Participants then read an ostensible news article titled "Apple's Factories Still 'Sweatshops' says Watchdog Group" (also validated in past research; Rothschild & Keefer, 2017). The article described exploitative labor practices uncovered at Apple Inc.'s Chinese factories which included "denying workers' basic human needs, such as allowing bathroom breaks, sufficient rest, and access to proper nutrition." The article went out of its way to blame Apple, stating "despite being aware of a multitude of

labor abuses in these factories, Apple Inc. failed to take action to stop these violations. As such they bear the responsibility for the suffering of thousands of workers." This article unambiguously presented Apple as a target third-party perpetrator exploiting laborers in the developing world.

Empathy. Participants completed a 7-item scale used in previous research (e.g., Pagano & Huo, 2007) to assess the extent to which participants felt *empathy*, *sympathy*, *compassion*, *softhearted*, *tenderness*, and *warmth* for workers suffering in Apple's Chinese factories and were *moved* by their plight. Responses were made on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) and were averaged (M = 5.42, SD = 1.13; α = .94).

Moral outrage. Finally participants completed a 6-item moral outrage measure used in previous research (Rothschild & Keefer, 2017; Rothschild et al., 2013) to assess anger at a third party for perpetrating harm against a victimized outgroup. Specifically, participants indicated the degree to which they felt anger at Apple for the harm caused by their exploitative labor practices (e.g., "Thinking about the situation the workers in Apple's Chinese factories have endured due to Apple's abusive labor practices makes me angry on their behalf"; "Knowing that Chinese workers are probably helpless against Apple's abusive labor practices makes me angry on their behalf"). Responses were made on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*) and were averaged (M = 5.32, SD = 1.53; α = .98).

Results

Zero-order correlations for all variables are presented in Table 1.

Moral Outrage

We regressed moral outrage on observer justice sensitivity and personal guilt (both continuous and centered) and their predicted interaction. We included general negative affect (excluding guilt) and empathy as additional covariates. Together these predictors accounted for a significant amount of variance in moral outrage, R^2_{adj} = .68, $F(5, 129)$ = 59.07, $p < .001$

(see Table 2 for models with and without covariates). Importantly, the main effect of JS_O on outrage was qualified by the predicted $JS_O \times$ Guilt interaction, which accounted for a significant increase in R^2, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F(1, 129) = 9.87$, $p = .002$ (Figure 1).

Consistent with predictions, a simple slopes analysis revealed that whereas guilt predicted greater outrage at corporate harm-doing among those lower (-1 SD) in JS_O, $\beta = .23$, $b = .31$, $SE = .10$, $t = 3.01$, $p = 003$, expressions of outrage among those high (+1 SD) in JS_O were unrelated to guilt, $\beta = -.07$, $b = -.09$, $SE = .11$, $t = -0.81$, $p = .42$. Put differently, whereas JS_O predicted more outrage when personal guilt was low (-1 SD), $\beta = .37$, $b = .85$, $SE = .17$, $t = 4.94$, $p < .001$, JS_O was not a significant predictor of outrage at high (+1 SD) guilt, $\beta = .07$, $b = .16$, $SE = .17$, $t = 0.93$, $p = .35$.

Study 1 Discussion

Results of Study 1 show that guilt predicted increased outrage at a third-party harm-doer among those low, but not high, in observer justice sensitivity. These findings replicate previous research on the relationship between guilt and outrage and support our current hypothesis that individual differences in justice sensitivity moderate this relationship. Specifically, the pattern of results is consistent with our prediction that defensive or self-serving outrage is more common at low observer sensitivity.

Results of Study 1 also show that justice sensitivity predicted outrage among those low, but not high, in guilt. While the results among low guilt participants are consistent with previous research showing a positive relationship between justice sensitivity and outrage, these findings further suggest that observer justice sensitivity alone is not always a reliable predictor of outrage. Situational factors (e.g., personal guilt) seem capable of overriding the relevance of these dispositions.

These primary findings held when controlling for general negative affect and empathy for those affected. These results replicate previous research (Rothschild & Keefer, 2017;

Rothschild et al., 2013) and undercut alternative interpretations of the findings. The finding that guilt plays a unique role in driving outrage, at least at low observer justice sensitivity, further demonstrates the importance of the moral aspect of guilt (rather than merely general negative affect) and controlling for empathy allowed us to address the possibility that participants' expressions of anger reflected empathic anger (Hoffman, 2000) rather than moral outrage. The fact that the primary interaction was unchanged by the inclusion of empathy is particularly important given the notable correlations between empathy and our other variables of interest.

Although the results of Study 1 were consistent with our predictions, the study has some limitations. First, a post-hoc power analysis revealed the study's test of the primary interaction to be underpowered (observed power = .46). Thus, any conclusions should be tempered by the potential that the obtained effects may not be reliable. Second, while the use of the PANAS allowed us to differentiate between general negative affect and personal guilt, the use of a single item measure of guilt is weak. Third, Study 1 did not assess justice sensitivity from other perspectives. Given the high correlations between observer, perpetrator, and beneficiary sensitivities (Schmitt et al., 2010), this leaves open the possibility that the obtained effects may not be specific to observer sensitivity.

Study 2

The primary goal of Study 2 was to replicate Study 1 with a larger sample to provide a more reliable test of the predicted effect. We also replaced the incidental single-item assessment of guilt used in Study 1 with a validated three item measure assessing guilt in the specific context of sweatshop labor.

In addition to assessing observer sensitivity, Study 2 also included the perpetrator and beneficiary justice sensitivity scales. Given that our outcome of interest targeted responses to third-party harm-doing, we predicted that justice sensitivity's moderating effect on the role of

guilt would be specific to *observer* sensitivity. Finally, we also tested whether the

hypothesized effects on moral outrage elicited support for punitive action against a third-

party harm-doer, an outcome commonly associated with outrage (Pagano & Huo, 2007).

Method

Two-hundred and seventy-four American adults were recruited to participate through

Mturk for $.60.[3] Data from 31 cases was excluded from analyses for failing an attention

check (25 participants), and/or spending less than 10 seconds viewing the article on

sweatshop labor (6 participants). The remaining 243 participants (159 women, 85 men, 3

unidentified) ranged in age from 19 to 73 years ($M = 32.94$, $SD = 10.65$). Excluding 4 non-

responses, over 66% of the remaining participants (159) reported owning an Apple product. [4]

Study 2 employed the same basic procedure as Study 1 with the addition of two additional

justice sensitivity subscales, a more reliable and targeted measure of personal guilt, and a

measure of support for third-party punishment.

Materials and Procedure

Observer justice sensitivity. Participants completed the same 10-item JS_O scale used

in Study 1 ($M = 4.09$, $SD = .74$; $\alpha = .84$).

Perpetrator justice sensitivity. Participants also completed the 10-item perpetrator

justice sensitivity (JS_P) scale ($M = 4.93$, $SD = .90$; $\alpha = .93$) designed to assess individual

differences in how people feel when they "treat someone else unfairly" (Schmitt et al., 2010).

Specifically, participants indicated whether they were upset by situations in which they

mistreat, discriminate or use another person (e.g., "It gets me down when I take something

from someone else that I don't deserve" ; "I feel guilty when I treat someone worse than

others").

Beneficiary justice sensitivity. Then participants completed the 10-item beneficiary

justice sensitivity (JS_B) scale ($M = 3.94$, $SD = .94$; $\alpha = .91$) designed to assess individual

differences in how people feel when their advantages come at the disadvantage of others (Schmitt et al., 2005). Specifically, participants indicated whether they were upset by situations in which they receive an unfair benefit (e.g., "It disturbs me when I receive what others ought to have" ; "I feel guilty when I receive better treatment than others").

Personal culpability induction. Participants then read the same fabricated news article about labor exploitation used in Study 1 and rated the extent to which they believed "workers in developing countries were suffering as a result of sweatshop labor conditions". A one sampled t-test revealed that participants' responses ($M = 6.45$, $SD = .87$) were significantly higher than scale's midpoint (4), $t(242) = 44.06$, $p < .001$, indicating a general acknowledgment that sweatshop workers experience harm. Participants also completed the behavioral survey used in Study 1. As in Study 1 a one sample t-test revealed that responses ($M = 4.27$, $SD = .86$) were significantly higher than scale's midpoint (4), $t(242) = 4.81$, $p < .001$, indicating a general tendency to engage in behaviors contributing to labor exploitation.

Guilt. Participants then completed a modified 3-item guilt measure used in previous research to assess guilt over a given outcome (Rothschild & Keefer, 2017). Specifically, participants indicated the extent to which they felt *guilty, regretful,* and *apologetic* for "the negative impact my lifestyle has on sweatshop workers". Responses (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) formed a composite measure of personal guilt ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.62$; $\alpha = .92$).

Moral outrage. Participants then read about Apple's exploitation of Chinese workers, and indicated the degree to which they felt anger at Apple's sweatshop labor practices using the same 6-item measure of moral outrage used in Study 1 ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.63$; $\alpha = .98$).

Support for retributive punishment. Participants also completed a modified retributive punishment scale used by previous research to assess individuals' desire to punish

a third-party perpetrator for harming a victimized outgroup (Pagano & Huo, 2007; Rothschild & Keefer, 2017). Specifically, participants indicated whether they supported efforts to punish Apple for the harm perpetrated against sweatshop workers in the developing world (e.g., "The United States should use whatever resources are available to prosecute corporations like Apple Inc. that are harming workers in developing countries"; "Whatever the cost, corporations like Apple Inc. must be brought to justice for unjustly hurting workers in developing countries"). Responses for all five items were made on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) and were averaged to form composite scores (M = 5.50, SD = 1.56; α = .97).

Results

Zero-order correlations for all variables are presented in Table 3.

Moral Outrage

We regressed moral outrage on observer, perpetrator, and beneficiary justice sensitivity scores, along with personal guilt (all continuous and centered), and interactions between each justice sensitivity type and guilt (JS$_O$ × guilt, JS$_P$ × guilt, JS$_B$ × guilt). Together these predictors accounted for a significant variance in outrage, R^2_{adj} = .46, $F(7, 235)$ = 30.27, $p < .001$ (see Table 4). Importantly, although all three justice sensitivity scores predicted moral outrage, only the effect of observer sensitivity was qualified by the predicted JS$_O$ × Guilt interaction, which by itself accounted for a significant increase in R^2, ΔR^2 = .015, $F(1, 235)$ = 6.75, p = .01 (Figure 2).

Simple slopes analysis revealed that guilt predicted greater outrage at corporate harm-doing among those lower (-1 SD) in JS$_O$, β = .65 b = .66, SE = .08, t = 8.06, $p < 001$. To a lesser degree, felt guilt also predicted outrage among those high (+1 SD) in JS$_O$, β = .30, b = .30, SE = .10, t = 3.14, p = .002. Put differently, whereas JS$_O$ predicted greater outrage at low

(-1 SD) guilt, $\beta = .40$, $b = .87$, $SE = .21$, $t = 4.16$, $p < .001$, JS_O was not a significant predictor of outrage at high (+1 SD) guilt, $\beta = .04$, $b = .09$, $SE = .20$, $t = 0.47$, $p = .64$.

Retributive Punishment

We regressed support for retributive punishment onto the same predictors. This model accounted for significant variance in support for retributive punishment, adjusted $R^2 = .34$, $F(7, 235) = 18.73$, $p < .001$ (see Table 5). Importantly, whereas both perpetrator and observer sensitivity were significant predictors of retributive punishment, only the effect of observer sensitivity was qualified by the predicted $JS_O \times$ Guilt interaction, which by itself accounted for a significant increase in R^2, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F(1, 235) = 7.56$, $p < .007$ (Figure 3).

Consistent with predictions a simple slopes analysis revealed that whereas guilt predicted increased support for punishing corporate harm-doing among those lower (-1 SD) in JS_O, $\beta = .60$, $b = .58$, $SE = .09$, $t = 6.69$, $p < 001$, the association between guilt and retributive punishment did not reach statistical significance among those high (+1 SD) in JS_O, $\beta = .19$, $b = .18$, $SE = .10$, $t = 1.76$, $p = .08$. JS_O predicted greater support for retributive punishment at low (-1 SD) guilt, $\beta = .47$, $b = .99$, $SE = .22$, $t = 4.44$, $p < .001$, but this association was eliminated at high (+1 SD) levels of guilt, $\beta = .05$, $b = .11$, $SE = .21$, $t = 0.54$, $p = .59$.

Study 2 Discussion

As in Study 1, Study 2 revealed a significant interaction between guilt and observer justice sensitivity on outrage at a third-party harm-doer. In line with our first broad hypothesis, guilt was a stronger predictor of outrage among those low (vs. high) in observer justice sensitivity. This was also true concerning support for punishing a corporate wrongdoer. Furthermore, while perpetrator sensitivity was positively associated with both outrage and retributive punishment, and beneficiary sensitivity was negatively associated with outrage, these effects were not qualified by guilt. This shows that *observer* justice

sensitivity uniquely moderated the relationship between guilt and third-party-directed outrage.

Unlike Study 1, Study 2 did find a significant effect of guilt on outrage at high JS_O. This discrepancy may have been due to any number of factors, including Study 2's use of a larger sample size and a domain specific assessment of guilt. While still consistent with the proposed moderating effect of justice sensitivity, this suggests that the outrage expressed by high (vs. low) observer-sensitive persons was at least less dependent, but not wholly independent, of felt guilt.

Importantly, although Studies 1 and 2 provide converging evidence that observer justice sensitivity moderates defensive or guilt-driven outrage, our conclusions are limited by the correlational nature of this research.

Study 3

Study 3 employed an experimental design to test whether justice sensitivity moderated the extent to which expressions of third-party-directed outrage reflect concerns about one's own moral identity. Adopting a paradigm used in past research (Rothschild & Keefer, 2017; Rothschild et al., 2012) participants were randomly assigned to a writing task that either allowed them to affirm their own moral status or not, prior to reporting their outrage at third-party corporate harm-doer. To the extent that outrage is expressed to maintain a moral identity, the opportunity to bolster one's moral status by other means would be expected to reduce expressions of outrage. Consistent with this premise, Rothschild and Keefer (2017; Study 5) found that a moral status affirmation attenuated guilt-driven outrage at a third-party harm-doer. If low (vs. high) observer-sensitive persons are more likely to express *defensive* outrage we would expect a moral identity affirmation to have a greater outrage-attenuation effect among those low (vs. high) in observer sensitivity.

Given the context of the present research, it is not unreasonable that participants could feel personally harmed by corporate practices that make them an unwitting accomplice. This creates the possibility that anger at a corporation's harm-doing may reflect feelings of *personal anger*, or anger at one's own perceived victimization, rather than moral outrage at the injustice suffered by others (Thomas et al., 2009). Study 3 was tested this possibility in two ways. First, in line with previous research, we measured and statistically controlled for the extent to which participants felt that they were negatively affected by corporations' sweatshop labor practices. Second, Study 3 included the *victim* justice sensitivity scale, which primarily assesses a concern for one's own fair treatment rather than a concern with justice (Gollwitzer, Schmitt, Schalke, Maes, & Baer, 2005; Schmitt et al., 2005). Assuming that we are assessing moral outrage rather than personal anger and that victim-sensitivity (unlike observer-sensitivity) does not reflect a genuine concern for others, we would not expect it to be a unique predictor of outrage or a moderator of the affirmation manipulation.

Method

One-hundred and ninety-nine students at a small liberal arts college participated in the study in exchange for course credit. [5] Data from 37 cases were excluded from analyses based on *a priori* criteria used in our previous studies: failing an attention check (30 participants), and/or spending less than 10 seconds viewing the article on sweatshop labor (7 participants). One additional case was removed for being an extreme outlier, spending an excessive period of time (56 min) on the affirmation task ($M = 2.43$ min, $SD = 1.97$ min). The remaining 161 participants (98 women, 62 men, 1 unidentified) ranged in age from 18 to 22 years ($M = 18.58$, $SD = .78$). Over 96% of the sample (155) reported owning a product made by Apple Inc.

Materials and Procedure

Observer justice sensitivity. Participants completed the same 10-item JS_O scale used in Study 1 ($M = 4.41$, $SD = .61$; $\alpha = .81$).

Victim justice sensitivity. Participants also completed the 10-item victim justice sensitivity (JS_V) scale designed to assess individual differences in how people respond to situations in which they are the victims of unfair treatment (Schmitt et al., 2005). Specifically, participants indicated whether they were upset by situations in which they received undue or unequal harm or reward (e.g., "It bothers me when others receive something which ought to be mine"; "It makes me angry when others receive a reward that I have earned"). Responses were made on the same 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) and were averaged ($M = 4.07$, $SD = .71$; $\alpha = .83$).

Personal culpability induction. Next participants were exposed to the same article used in Study 1, which highlighted the harmful effects of sweatshop labor conditions in the developing world. As in Study 1 participants acknowledged that workers in the developing world suffer as a result of sweatshop labor conditions ($M = 6.27$, $SD = .95$; $t(160) = 30.16$, $p < .001$). Participants also completed the 5-item behavioral survey used before to highlight participants' own culpability for harmful labor conditions. As in Study 1 participants reported regular engagement in the behaviors purported to contribute to labor exploitation ($M = 4.39$, $SD = .73$; $\alpha = .81$) was significantly higher than the scale's midpoint (4), $t(160) = 6.74$, $p < .001$.

Personal harm. To address the potential that participants may feel personal anger over sweatshop labor practices participants completed a single face-valid item assessing the perception that they were personally harmed by exploitative labor practices (Rothschild & Keefer, 2017). Specifically, participants rated their agreement with the following statement: "Sweatshop labor conditions have a direct negative effect on my life." Responses were made on the same 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.48$)

Affirmation manipulation. Next, participants completed a writing task purported to be a personality assessment. This task was an affirmation manipulation used by previous research (Rothschild & Keefer, 2017; Rothschild et al., 2012). Participants assigned to the *moral identity affirmation* condition responded to the following writing prompt: "In a few sentences briefly describe something about yourself that makes you feel like a good and decent person." Participants in the *no affirmation* condition responded to the following writing prompt: "In a few sentences please briefly describe your normal morning routine." An inspection of participants' written responses revealed that all participants wrote at least one sentence and no participants explicitly wrote about sweatshop labor.

Moral outrage. Finally, as in Study 1, participants read about Apple's exploitation of Chinese workers and completed the same 6-item moral outrage scale to assess anger at Apple for the unjust harm caused by their exploitative labor practices ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.22$; $\alpha = .96$).

Results

Zero-order correlations for all variables are presented in Table 6. While JS_O was positively associated with both moral outrage and JS_V, no significant association emerged between the latter two variables (replicating past research; Rothmund et al., 2014). Furthermore, whereas perceived personal harm was positively related to outrage, it was not associated with either observer or victim justice sensitivity.

Moral Outrage

We regressed moral outrage onto affirmation manipulation (coded: *moral identity affirmation* = 1, *no affirmation* = 0), observer and victim justice sensitivity (both continuous and centered), and the justice sensitivity × affirmation interaction for each subscale. We included personal harm as an additional continuous covariate. Together these predictors accounted for significant variance in outrage, $R^2_{adj} = .15$, $F(6, 154) = 5.75$, $p < .001$ (see

Table 7 for effects with and without controlling for personal harm). Importantly, whereas there was no evidence of either a main effect or interaction involving JS_V, there were significant a main effects for both JS_O and moral affirmation, which were qualified by the predicted $JS_O \times$ Affirmation interaction (Figure 4). This interaction accounted for a significant increase in R^2, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(1, 154) = 5.63$, $p = .02$.

Consistent with predictions a simple slopes analysis revealed that in the *moral affirmation* condition, JS_O was associated with greater outrage at corporate harm-doing, $\beta = .55$, $b = 1.10$, $SE = .29$, $t = 3.76$, $p < 001$. In contrast, in the *no affirmation* condition, there was no significant association between JS_O and outrage, $\beta = .13$, $b = .26$, $SE = .20$, $t = 1.33$, $p = .19$. Also consistent with predictions, comparison of the low-JS_O participants (-1 SD) demonstrated that those given the opportunity to affirm their moral identity (vs. no affirmation) showed reduced moral outrage $\beta = -.37$, $b = -.89$, $SE = .27$, $t = -3.22$, $p = .002$. In contrast, among high-JS_O participants (+1 SD) there was no significant difference in outrage between those who were and were not given the opportunity to affirm their own moral identity, $\beta = .06$, $b = .13$, $SE = .28$, $t = 0.48$, $p = .64$.

Study 3 Discussion

Results of Study 3 show that the opportunity to affirm one's moral identity in an unrelated context reduced outrage at a third-party harm-doer among those low, but not high, in *observer* justice sensitivity. Effects remained when statistically controlling for perceptions of personal harm. These findings serve to both replicate previous research by showing the outrage-attenuating effect of a moral identity boost and extend this work by showing the moderating role of justice sensitivity. Consistent with the results of Studies 1 and 2, these findings suggest that the outrage expressed by low (vs. high) observer-sensitive persons in particular, may be motivated by concerns about one's own moral identity rather than concerns about justice.

Study 3 also found that observer justice sensitivity was only a significant predictor of moral outrage when participants had been given the opportunity to affirm their personal moral identity. As with Studies 1 and 2, this finding highlights the salience of moral identity concerns as an important boundary condition influencing the relationship between justice sensitivity and moral outrage.

The fact that victim sensitivity was unrelated to outrage and that results held after controlling for perceived personal harm contradicts the view that our findings reflect variation in personal anger, rather than moral outrage. The predicted null effects of victim sensitivity are also consistent with the idea that, unlike observer sensitivity, victim sensitivity reflects an egoistic concern with justice for the self, rather than a concern with justice more broadly.

Although Study 3's experimental design allows us to infer that moral identity concerns were a significant driving force behind expressions of outrage among low, but not high observer-sensitive persons, this observation requires replication on a more representative sample. Furthermore, whereas the present research focuses on justice sensitivity, the bulk of the empirical literature on individual differences in justice-related concerns centers on inter-individual differences in one's belief in a just world (Dalbert, 2009). Research grounded in just world theory (Lerner, 1965, 1980) finds that people vary in their tendency to believe the world is a just place where one can reap rewards and avoid negative outcomes by abiding by basic rules and norms (Furnham, 2003). As with justice sensitivity, the belief in a just world has been presented as an indicator of the strength of an individual's justice motive, or striving for justice as an end in itself (Dalbert, 2001; Schmitt, 1998). It remains to be seen how assessments of justice sensitivity compare with just world beliefs in predicting whether or not expressions of outrage are likely to reflect a concern for one's own moral identity as opposed a concern for justice.

Study 4

The first goal of Study 4 was to test the replicability of the observer-sensitivity ×
moral affirmation interaction found in Study 3 with a larger and more diverse sample of
participants. We did this by recruiting participants online rather than using a convenience
sample of undergraduates. We employed the same basic experimental paradigm used in
Study 3, with some minor alterations described below.

Another goal of Study 4 was to determine whether the moderation effect obtained in
the previous study reflects a unique facet of justice sensitivity or a characteristic shared, or
even better accounted for, by individual differences in just world beliefs. Interestingly,
although both constructs are presented as tapping inter-individual difference in one's justice
motive, correlations between measures of justice sensitivity and belief in a just world tend to
be quite low (e.g., -.04 to .18; Schmitt et al., 2013). Furthermore, whereas justice sensitivity
has been shown to predict outrage at another's victimization, beliefs in a just world have been
shown to predict the derogation of innocent victims when compensation is not possible (e.g.,
Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Reconciling these findings Baumert and colleagues (2013)
suggest that whereas justice sensitivity may capture an unconditional concern for, and
commitment to, justice as a universal moral principle, the belief in a just world primarily
captures a conditional concern with justice rooted in a need to perceive the world as ordered.

Justice sensitivity and belief in a just world differ in one critical way that we
anticipated would lead the former, but not the latter, to moderate the relationship between the
affirmation and outrage. Justice sensitivity primarily reflects a genuine concern with
rectifying injustice while the belief in a just world reflects a motive to see the world as just,
regardless of whether that perception is achieved by actual change or merely a legitimization
of some outcome (e.g., blaming the victim). Accordingly, we predicted that individual
differences in observer sensitivity, but not the belief in a just world, would predict third-

party-directed outrage at labor exploitation. Furthermore, we predicted that differences in observer sensitivity, but not the belief in a just world, would moderate the moral affirmation-induced attenuation of outrage at a corporate harm-doer. We also predicted parallel effects on support for punishing third-party harm-doing.

Finally, given that political beliefs have been shown to influence attitudes about the redress of corporate injustice (e.g. Kardos, Leidner, Zsolnai, & Castano, 2016), we measured and controlled for self-reported political orientation in Study 4 to ensure that the predicted effects were not due to variations in political ideology.

Method

Four-hundred and sixty-four American adults were recruited to participate through Amazon's Mturk service for $.60. [6] Data from 54 cases were removed from the dataset prior to analyses based on previous *a priori* exclusion criteria: failing an attention check (42 participants), and/or spending less than 10 seconds viewing the first article on sweatshop labor (24 participants). The remaining 410 participants (264 women, 140 men, 6 unidentified) ranged in age from 18 to 67 years ($M = 32.10$, $SD = 10.07$). The average self-reported political orientation (1 = *very conservative*, 4 = *moderate*, 7 = *very liberal)* of our sample skewed slightly liberal ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.59$). Over 63% of participants reported owning a product made by Apple. Study 4 used the same materials as Study 3 with the exception of assessing general belief in a just world in place of victim justice sensitivity, recording political orientation and including retributive punishment of third-party harm-doing as another dependent measure.

Materials and Procedure

Observer justice sensitivity. Participants completed the same 10-item JS_O scale used in the previous studies ($M = 4.19$, $SD = .77$; $\alpha = .87$).

Belief in a just word. Participants also completed the 6-item General Belief in Just World (BJW) scale designed to measure individuals' belief that the world in general is a just place (Dalbert, Montada, & Schmitt, 1987). Specifically, participants indicated their agreement/disagreement with statements describing the world as a place in which justice prevails (e.g., "I think the world is a just place"; "I am confident that, by and large, people get what they deserve"). Responses were made on a 6-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*) and were averaged to form composite scores ($M = 3.23$, $SD = .84$; $\alpha = .78$).

Personal culpability induction. As in the previous studies, participants were then exposed to an article about sweatshop labor conditions in the developing world and completed a short survey meant to highlight their own culpability. Participants both acknowledged that workers were suffering under sweatshop workers ($M = 6.46$, $SD = .86$; $t(409) = 57.95$, $p < .001$) and reported engaging in the behaviors purported to contribute to labor exploitation ($M = 4.33$, $SD = .82$; $t(409) = 8.09$, $p < .001$).

Affirmation manipulation. Participants then completed the same writing task used in Study 3 and were randomly assigned to either the moral identity affirmation or no affirmation condition. As in Study 3, participants' written responses revealed that all participants wrote at least one sentence.

Moral outrage and support for retributive punishment. As in the previous studies, participants read the article detailing Apple's Inc.'s exploitation of those working in their Chinese factories, and indicated their anger and support for punishing Apple Inc. for its harmful sweatshop practices using the aforementioned moral outrage scale ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.56$; $\alpha = .98$) and retributive punishment scale ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.39$; $\alpha = .95$)

Results

Zero-order correlations are presented in Table 8. JS_O was positively associated with both outrage and support for punishing a third-party harm-doer. In contrast BJW was

negatively related to both JS_O and retributive punishment, and had no significant association with outrage. Political orientation scores were associated with all other variables, although notably showed diverging associations with JS_O (which skewed liberal) and BJW (which skewed conservative).

Moral Outrage

We regressed moral outrage onto affirmation manipulation (coded: *moral identity affirmation* = 1, *no affirmation* = 0), observer justice sensitivity and belief in a just world (both continuous and centered) along with the key two-way interactions ($JS_O \times$ affirmation and BJW $\times$ affirmation). We included political orientation as an additional continuous and centered covariate. Together these predictors accounted for a significant amount of variance in moral outrage, $R^2_{adj} = .18$, $F(6, 403) = 15.73$, $p < .001$ (see Table 9 for all effects with and without controlling for political orientation). Importantly, whereas there was no evidence of either a main effect or interaction involving just world beliefs, there was a significant a main effect for observer justice sensitivity that was qualified by the predicted $JS_O \times$ Affirmation interaction (Figure 5). This significant interaction accounted for a significant increase in R^2, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $\Delta F(1, 403) = 7.83$, $p = .01$.

Consistent with predictions, a simple slopes analysis revealed that in the *moral affirmation* condition, JS_O was positively associated with outrage at corporate harm-doing, $\beta = .48$, $b = .98$, $SE = .13$, $t = 7.37$, $p < 001$. JS_O was also a significant predictor of expressed outrage in the *no affirmation* condition, $\beta = .22$, $b = .46$, $SE = .13$, $t = 3.44$, $p = .001$. Also consistent with predictions, comparison of the low-JS_O participants demonstrated that those given the opportunity to affirm their moral identity (vs. no affirmation) showed reduced moral outrage $\beta = -.20$, $b = -.64$, $SE = .20$, $t = -3.20$, $p = .002$. In contrast, among high-JS_O participants there was no significant difference in outrage between those who were and were

not given the opportunity to affirm their own moral identity, $\beta = .05$, $b = .17$, $SE = .20$, $t = 0.84$, $p = .40$.

Retributive Punishment

We regressed support for retributive punishment onto the same predictors. Together these predictors accounted for significant variance in support for retributive punishment, $R^2_{adj} = .18$, $F(6, 403) = 16.29$, $p < .001$ (see Table 10 for effects with and without controlling for political orientation). Importantly, whereas there was no evidence of either a main effect or interaction involving BJW, there was a significant a main effect for JS_O that was qualified by the predicted $JS_O \times$ Affirmation interaction (see Figure 6). This interaction accounted for a significant increase in R^2, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(1, 403) = 5.23$, $p = .02$.

Consistent with predictions a simple slopes analysis revealed that in the *moral affirmation* condition, JS_O was associated with greater retributive punishment, $\beta = .39$, $b = .71$, $SE = .12$, $t = 6.05$, $p < 001$. JS_O was also a significant predictor of punitiveness in the *no affirmation* condition, $\beta = .18$, $b = .33$, $SE = .12$, $t = 2.84$, $p < .01$. Consistent with predictions, comparison of the low-JS_O participants (-1 SD) demonstrated that those given the opportunity to affirm their moral identity (vs. no affirmation) showed reduced punitiveness $\beta = -.18$, $b = -.48$, $SE = .18$, $t = -2.68$, $p = .01$. In contrast, among high- JS_O participants (+1 SD) a moral affirmation did not yield an appreciable effect, $\beta = .04$, $b = .10$, $SE = .18$, $t = 0.57$, $p = .57$.

Study 4 Discussion

As in Study 3, Study 4 found that low, but not high observer-sensitive people express less outrage and support for punishing at a third-party harm-doer when they are given the opportunity to affirm their own personal morality in an unrelated context. This pattern of effects remained when statistically controlling for differences in political ideology. By

replicating the primary results of Study 3 on a larger sample, these findings bolster our confidence that differences in justice sensitivity moderate expressions of defensive outrage.

One discrepancy between Study 4 and Study 3 was the fact that justice sensitivity was a significant predictor of outrage in both the affirmation and no affirmation condition, although the effect was greater in the former. This difference may be the result of Study 4's larger sample size. More broadly, these results are consistent with the previous studies in highlighting the interplay between personality and relevant situational factors.

Importantly, in contrast to justice sensitivity, Study 4 found that individual differences in the belief in a just world did not moderate the effects of moral affirmation on either outrage or retributive punishment. In concert with the previous studies, these findings highlight observer justice sensitivity as a unique moderator of defensive outrage at third-party harm-doing. Belief in a just world was uncorrelated with outrage and negatively associated with both support for punishing third-party harm-doing and justice sensitivity. These findings are consistent with Baumert et al. (2013)'s claim that unlike justice sensitivity, the belief in a just world may not reflect variations in one's genuine unconditional concern with justice.

General Discussion

Four studies supported the claim that individual differences in observer justice sensitivity moderates the extent to which expressions of outrage reflect concerns about one's own moral identity rather than concerns with justice per se. Studies 1 and 2 found that, compared to those high in observer sensitivity, low observer-sensitive participants' moral outrage and support for retributive punishment were strongly predicted by guilt. Using an experimental paradigm, Studies 3 and 4 found that the chance to affirm one's personal moral status reduced such expressions of third-party-directed outrage and punitiveness among those low, but not high in observer sensitivity. In other words, while observer-sensitive

participants expressed outrage regardless of their current moral standing (overall $r = .05$, $p = .44$), those low in observer justice sensitivity showed elevated outrage when they felt guilt or otherwise lacked a moral affirmation (overall r = .38, p < .0001; for full meta-analysis see Appendix A).

Supporting the specificity of the obtained observer-sensitivity effects in the context of third-party-directed outrage there was no evidence of moderation by perpetrator sensitivity, beneficiary sensitivity (Study 2), victim sensitivity (Study 3), or just world beliefs (Study 4). We took steps to acknowledge alternative explanations by measuring and controlling for extraneous variables. For instance, controlling for general negative affect in Study 1 we showed that the association between guilt and moral outrage among those low but not high in observer justice sensitivity was not reducible to variation in general negative affect. We also sought to ensure that the obtained effects reflected variations in moral outrage as opposed to empathic or personal anger. We did this by covarying out the extent to which participants empathized with the workers harmed by the corporation's sweatshop labor practices (Study 1) and the extent to which participants felt personally harmed by those practices (Study 3). Given the potentially political nature of the issues at hands we also controlled for self-reported political ideology to no effect.

Contribution to previous literatures

Previous research presents compelling evidence that outrage in the name of justice can reflect a motivated effort to alleviate guilt and bolster a moral self-image (Rothschild & Keefer, 2017; Rothschild et al., 2013). However, whereas past research focused on understanding *when* defensive expressions of outrage are likely to occur, the present studies provide initial evidence concerning *who* is likely to do so. Our findings identify important boundary conditions for the phenomenon of defensive outrage and show that outrage is not always defensive: Participants high in observer justice sensitivity expressed outrage

regardless of their current feelings of guilt or moral superiority. More broadly these studies illustrate how research investigating responses to situational threats can benefit from considering the moderating role of personality.

The present research also makes significant contributions to the literature on justice sensitivity. Observer (as well as perpetrator and beneficiary) justice sensitivity is conceptualized as reflecting stable differences in a person's concern with, and motivation to uphold justice as a universal moral principle. As evidence of this point, researchers have linked observer justice sensitivity with moral outrage and a desire to punish third-party violators, even at a cost to the self (Fetchenhauer & Huang, 2004; Lotz et al., 2011). However, the fact that outrage can sometimes serve to bolster a sense of one's moral status means that the effects of observer sensitivity are not so straightforward. The present research provides greater clarity by assessing not only the quantity of outrage expressed, by also indirectly assessing the motivation behind this outrage. Consistent with the assumption that observer justice sensitivity reflects a "genuine" concern with justice (Baumert et al. 2013), we found that the expressions of outrage among high (vs low) observer-sensitive persons' were largely independent of measured and manipulated personal moral status.

Although Studies 2 and 3 found associations between observer- and the other justice sensitivity scales, the specificity of the primary interactions support the conceptual and contextual distinctiveness of observer sensitivity. Study 4 went further to differentiate justice sensitivity from the belief in a just world, a preeminent example of a core justice motive (Hafer & Sutton, 2016). Although presented as a concern with justice, previous research has shown that a strong belief in a just world does not always predict reactions to injustice (Callan, Kay, Davidenko, & Ellard, 2009; Ellard, Harvey, & Callan, 2016). Consistent with this literature we found just world beliefs to be unrelated to outrage and negatively associated with third-party punishment. We also found just world beliefs to be inversely related to

observer sensitivity. Taken together these findings suggest that whereas justice sensitivity may capture a readiness to see injustice in order to right any wrongs, the belief in a just world captures a tendency to deny injustice in order to maintain the illusion of justice.

Limitations and future directions

Importantly, whereas the present studies provide consistent evidence that outrage among high (vs low) observer-sensitive persons is largely independent of concerns with one's own moral status, we cannot definitely claim that this outrage primarily reflects a "genuine" concern for justice. For instance, it's possible that those high in justice sensitivity were tailoring their responses in accordance with prescriptive norms of moral behavior. Research shows that those high in justice sensitivity are more likely to see 'being moral' as a central aspect of their self-concept (Rothmund, Männel, & Altzschner, 2012). Given that people are motivated to behave in ways that are consistent with their identity (Emde, Biringen, Clyman, & Oppenheim, 1991), this raises the possibility that high justice-sensitive persons may express moral outrage because they believe that they (as moral people) ought to be outraged.

Unfortunately, self-report measures are notoriously vulnerable to social desirability and self-deception. As such, we are limited in our ability to determine whether expressions of outrage reflect a genuine emotional experience or the expectation that one ought to respond as such. One way for future research to overcome this limitation would be to employ measures that are less amenable to conscious deliberation. For instance, Johnston, Sherman and Grusec (2013) measured moral outrage by assessing heart rate and diastolic blood pressure in response to moral violations. Interestingly, Johnston and colleagues found these physiological markers of outrage were predicted by implicit, but not explicit measures of moral identity. Building on this approach, future research may consider whether implicit measures of justice sensitivity may better predict spontaneous, real-world expressions of outrage.

The context of the present studies focuses on a real-world problem that draws consumers, corporations, and workers together in a complicated web. Because of this symbiotic relationship, it is possible that at least some participants may have explicitly viewed themselves and the corporate harm-doer as part of a larger system perpetuating injustice. In part our studies leveraged this fact to instill feelings of personal guilt through the consumer behavior questionnaire. This raises the possibility that our measure of outrage at corporate harm-doing may have captured feelings of ingroup anger, rather than outgroup-directed outrage. Importantly, two key pieces of evidence suggest that our primary findings are not reducible to variations in ingroup anger. First, we assessed whether or not participants owned Apple products in Studies 2 through 4 as a proxy for whether or not Apple might be seen as an ingroup. Analyses found that the observed effects were unchanged when statistically controlling for Apple ownership and none of the primary interactions were moderated by Apple ownership. Second, Study 2 found that even with perpetrator sensitivity included in the model, observer sensitivity uniquely predicted outrage and punitiveness, and it was observer, not perpetrator sensitivity that served as a significant moderator. Future research could further differentiate ingroup and out-group-directed outrage by explicitly assessing identification with a third-party harm-doer or manipulating the ingroup/outgroup designation of a potential third-party target (e.g., exploited foreign laborers vs. exploited American consumers).

We made a conscious decision to adopt methods used by previous research and keep materials largely consistent across studies to test the replicability of our findings. While such efforts were taken in an effort to maximize internal validity and bolster confidence in our effects, the decision to examine effects in a specific context and use uniform study materials has the downside of limiting the external validity of this research.

Furthermore, our choice to focus on the influence of observer sensitivity on outrage expressed under a specific set of conditions (i.e., salient personal or collective harm-doing paired with exposure to a third-party perpetrating the same harm) limits our ability to draw conclusions about the potential boundary conditions for these effects. Because we relied on designs that exposed all participants to a specific moral threat in order to test the moderating role of justice sensitivity; we cannot speak to the nuanced relations between justice sensitivity and outrage under other circumstances (e.g., in the absence of threat).

Would the obtained interaction extend to contexts beyond sweatshop labor? For example, if the topic were something more benign (e.g., a parking violation), observer sensitivity may not moderate expressions of outrage solely given the lower stakes. There is seemingly no limit to the diversity of things that inspire outrage, so the breadth of the phenomenon calls for further study.

By focusing on sweatshop labor, we also limited the topic to a domain in which participants bear some personal culpability as consumers. What if one's immorality is unrelated to third-party harm-doing? For instance, if an individual were informed of a previously unknown war crime in a distant country, we might see similar effects to the extent that highly observer sensitive participants would still be expected to express outrage, but this is unclear.

In addition to limiting our scope to a domain in which participants bear personal accountability, we also focused on a scenario in which the harm-doing was perpetrated at the group level. We cannot speak to the potential outcome of a scenario in which the harm-doing is perpetrated solely by the perceiver (without the complicity of corporations and global capitalism). If an individual were reminded of personal misdeeds, they may still show reactive expressions of outrage of unrelated parties to bolster their own moral status, but our data did not explore outrage in that context. Ultimately, gauging the potential real world

relevance of the present work hinges on future efforts to exploring such questions using different methodologies to assess the generalizability of our effects across contexts.

Conclusion

The current series of studies integrates literature on the defensive uses of moral outrage with insights on a critical individual difference that moderates this process. By shedding light on this variation by personality, we further illustrate how truly complex moral outrage can be: In some situations and for some people, it serves to assuage doubts about one's own morality. For other situations and individuals, outrage seems to represent a genuine motive to right a wrong and improve the world. Recognizing this variation calls not for a reductionistic view of outrage as mere theater or authentic concern, but rather for a greater appreciation of the many psychological functions of moral outrage.

**Appendix A: Meta-analytic summary of current studies**

Table 1.

Meta-analytic summary of effect of threatened moral status on observed outcomes.

	r [95% CI]	*Z*	*p*
Low (-1 SD) JSo	.38 [.21, .54]	4.44	< .0001
High (+1 SD) JSo	.05 [-.08, .18]	0.76	.44

Note. Effects of affirmation in Studies 3 and 4 have been reverse-scored to put all effects on the same metric. Summary translated all standardized beta's in *r* (Peterson & Brown, 2005) and conducted random-effects meta-analysis to account for varying methods across studies.
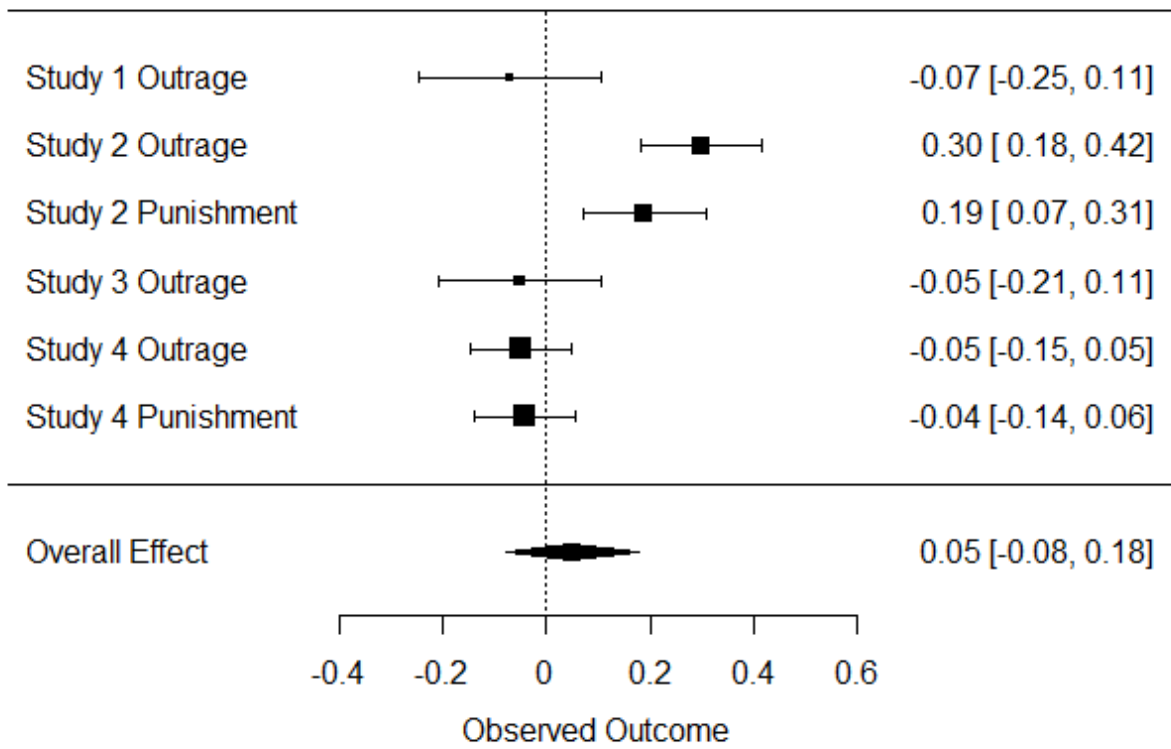
Figure 1.

Overall effect of threated moral status on observed outcomes at low (-1 SD) JSo.
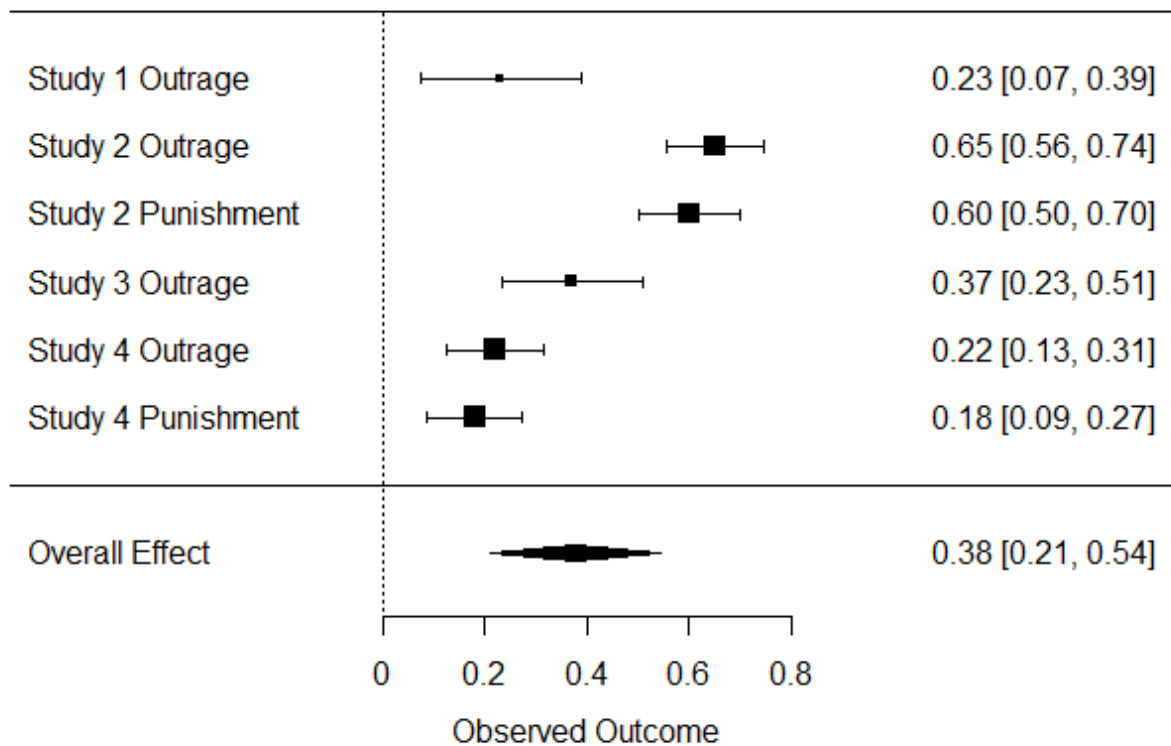
Figure 2.

Overall effect of threated moral status on observed outcomes at high (+1 SD) JSo.

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Footnotes

[1] We conducted power analysis using G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) for all studies. This revealed that a total sample of 150 for Study 1 would be necessary to ensure .80 power to detect a small to moderate effect for our predicted interaction.

[2] For each study all measured and manipulated variables are presented. All data are available from the corresponding author upon request.

[3] In an effort to ensure .80 power, assuming comparable effects as Study 1, we sought a total sample of 247. Factoring in the exclusion rate from Study 1 (10%), we estimated that we would need to collect approximately 275 participants.

[4] Studies 2-4 found that Apple product ownership had no appreciable effect on the predicted interactions when entered as an additional covariate, nor did this variable moderate the obtained two-way interactions. We excluded these analyses for ease of presentation.

[5] In an effort to ensure .80 power, assuming a small to medium effect, we sought a total sample of 177. Factoring in the exclusion rate from Studies 1 (10%) and 2 (11%) we estimated that we would need to collect approximately 200 participants.

[6] In an effort to ensure .80 power, assuming comparable effects as Study 3, we sought a total sample of 373. Factoring in the exclusion rate from Study 3 (19%) we estimated that we would need to collect approximately 460 participants.

Table 1. *Zero-order correlations between observed variables (Study 1)*

Predictors	1	2	3	4	5
1. JS_O	1	--	--	--	--
2. Guilt	.42***	1	--	--	--
3. Moral Outrage	.58***	.54***	1	--	--
4. Empathy	.52***	.50***	.34***	1	--
5. General Negative Affect	.18*	.50***	.40**	.26**	1

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

Table 2. *Estimated parameters for model predicted moral outrage with and without*

covariates (Study1)

Predictors	β	*b*	*t*	β	*b*	*t*
General Negative Affect	.12	.29	2.17*	--	--	--
Empathy	.56	.75	9.01***	--	--	--
JS_O	.22	.51	3.78***	.42	.96	6.01***
Guilt	.08	.11	1.27	.33	.44	4.81***
$JS_O \times$ Guilt	-.16	-.30	-3.14**	-.21	-.40	-3.37**

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

Table 3. *Zero-order correlations between observed variables (Study 2)*

Predictors	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. JS_O	1	--	--	--	--	--
2. JS_B	.63***	1	--	--	--	--
3. JS_P	.47***	.66***	1	--	--	--
4. Guilt	.31***	.42***	.38***	1	--	--
5. Moral Outrage	.36***	.32***	.44***	.61***	1	--
6. Retributive Punishment	.37***	.30***	.37***	.51***	.77***	1

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$
***$p < .001$

Table 4. *Estimated parameters for model predicted moral outrage (Study 2)*

Predictors	β	b	t
JS_O	.22	.48	3.51***
JS_P	.27	.49	4.13***
JS_B	-.19	-.34	-2.62**
Guilt	.48	.48	8.45***
$JS_O \times$ Guilt	-.17	-.24	-2.60*
$JS_P \times$ Guilt	-.10	-.10	-1.37
$JS_B \times$ Guilt	.13	.13	1.50

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

Table 5. *Estimated parameters for model predicted retributive punishment (Study 2)*

Predictors	β	b	t
JS_O	.26	.55	3.77***
JS_P	.20	.35	2.81**
JS_B	-.14	-.24	-1.77
Guilt	.39	.38	6.30***
$JS_O \times$ Guilt	-.20	-.27	-2.75**
$JS_P \times$ Guilt	.001	.001	0.02
$JS_B \times$ Guilt	.11	.11	1.17

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

Table 6. *Zero-order correlations between observed variables (Study 3)*

Predictors	1	2	3	4
1. JS_O	1	--	--	--
2. JS_V	.44***	1	--	--
3. Moral Outrage	.27**	.05	1	--
4. Personal Harm	.07	-.01	.25**	1

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

Table 7. *Estimated parameters for model predicted moral outrage with and without*

covariates (Study 3)

Predictors	β	*b*	*t*	B	*b*	*t*
Personal Harm	.22	.18	3.00**	--	--	--
JS_V	-.06	-.11	-0.59	-.07	-.13	-0.70
JS_O	.13	.26	1.33	.15	.29	1.44
Affirmation	-.16	-.38	-2.12*	-.15	-.36	-1.98*
$JS_V \times$ Affirmation	-.07	-.18	-0.60	-.07	-.19	-0.62
$JS_O \times$ Affirmation	.26	.84	2.37*	.28	.89	2.45*

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

Table 8. *Zero-order correlations between observed variables (Study 4)*

Predictors	1	2	3	4	5
1. JS_O	1	--	--	--	
2. BJW	-.21***	1	--	--	
3. Moral Outrage	.38***	-.09	1	--	
4. Retributive Punishment	.34***	-.16**	.76***	1	
5. Political Orientation	.17**	-.29***	.22***	.31***	1

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$
***$p < .001$

Table 9. *Estimated parameters for model predicted moral outrage with and without*

covariates (Study 4)

Predictors	β	b	t	β	b	t
Political Orientation	.16	.16	3.33**	--	--	--
BJW	.07	.04	0.60	-.01	-.01	-0.10
JS_O	.22	.46	3.44**	.24	.48	3.63***
Affirmation	-.08	-.23	-1.66	-.09	-.29	-2.04*
BJW × Affirmation	-.003	-.01	-0.05	.002	.01	-0.03
JS_O × Affirmation	.18	.52	2.80**	.19	.54	2.83**

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

Table 10. *Estimated parameters for model predicted retributive punishment with and without covariates (Study 4)*

Predictors	β	*b*	*t*	β	*b*	*t*
Political Orientation	.24	.21	5.05***	--	--	--
BJW	-.002	-.004	-0.04	-.07	-.11	-1.07
JS_O	.18	.33	2.84**	.21	.37	3.09**
Affirmation	-.07	-.19	-1.51	-.10	-.27	-2.07*
BJW × Affirmation	-.03	-.07	-0.47	-.02	-.05	-0.33
JS_O × Affirmation	.15	.38	2.29*	.16	.40	2.32*

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001
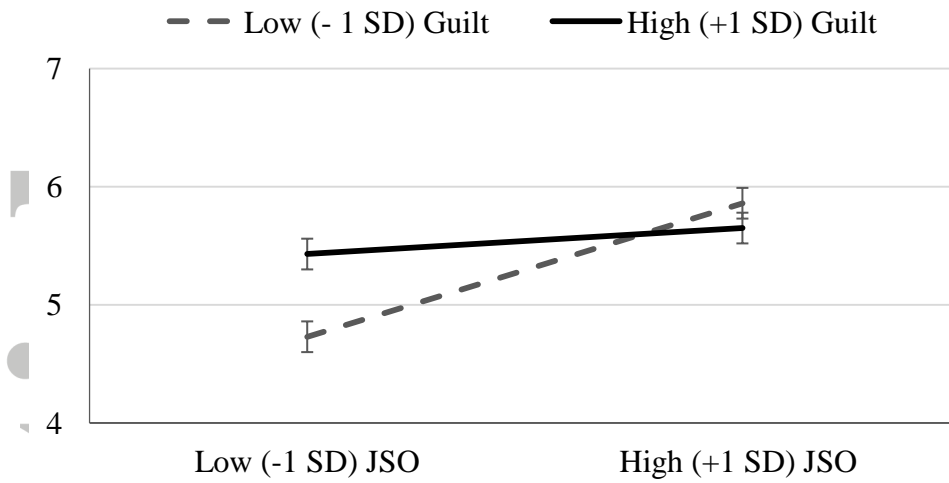
Figure 1. Effect of observer justice sensitivity and personal guilt on moral outrage at a

corporation's sweatshop labor practices controlling for general negative affect and empathy
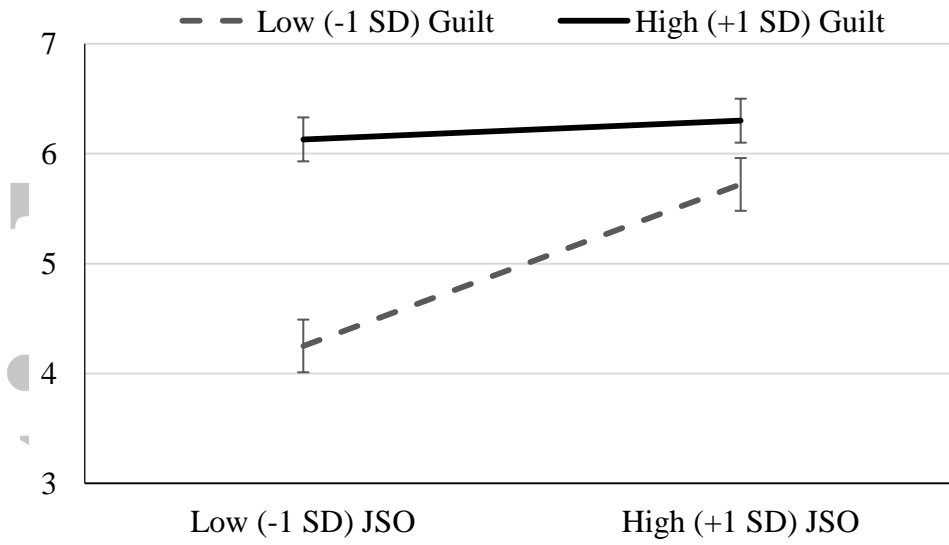
(*Study 1*)
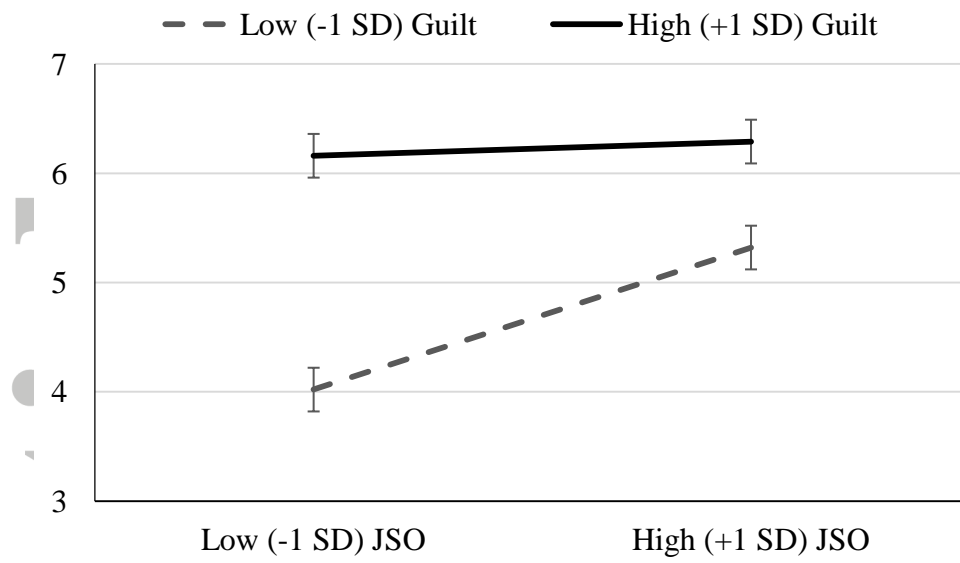
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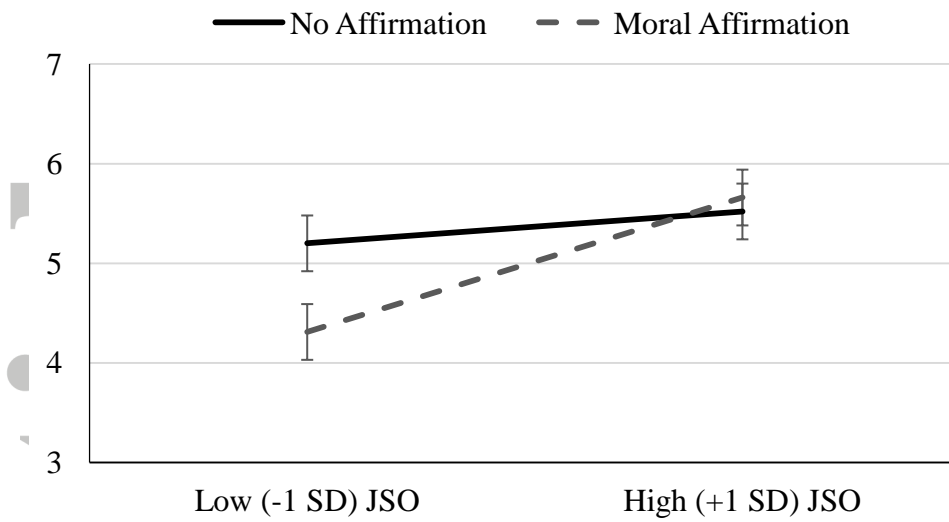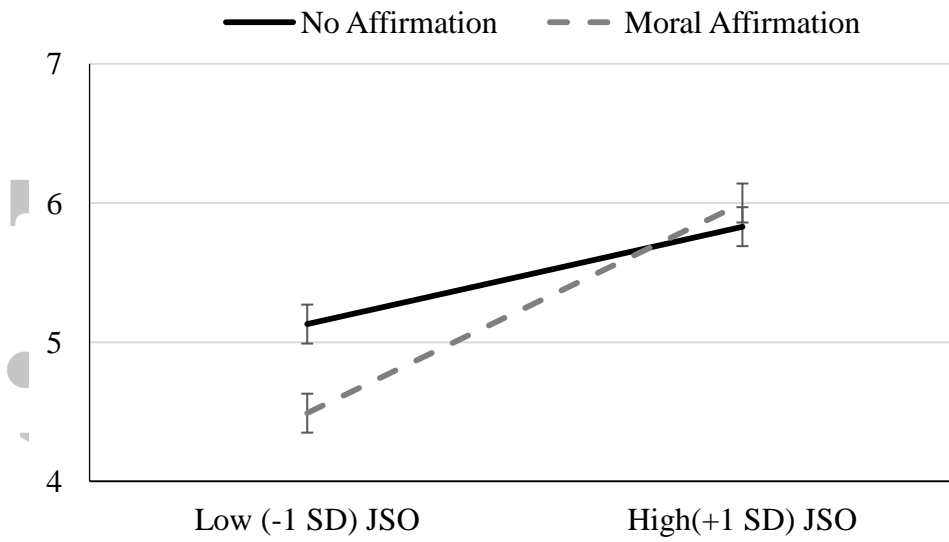
corporation's sweatshop labor practices (*Study 2*)

Figure 3. Effect of observer justice sensitivity and personal guilt on support for punishing
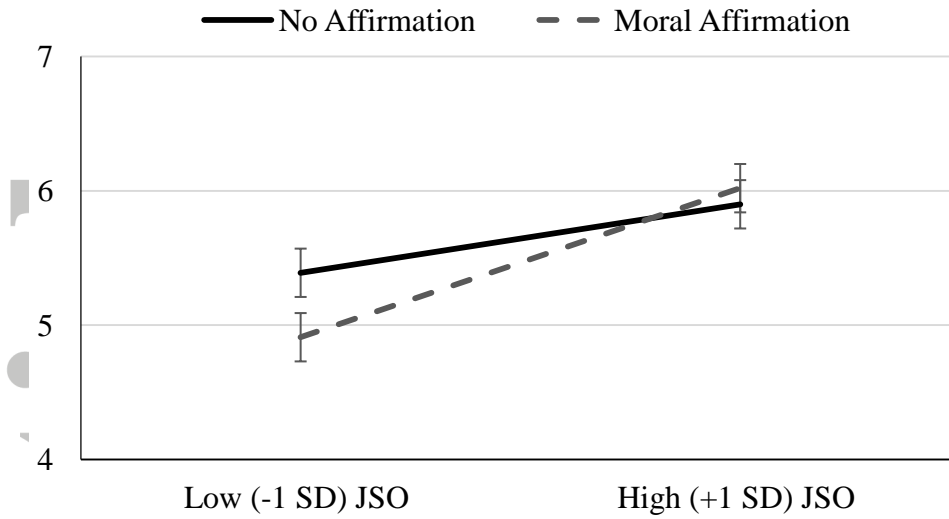
corporations for sweatshop labor practices (*Study 2*)

Figure 4. Effect of observer justice sensitivity and moral identity affirmation on moral outrage at corporations for sweatshop labor practices controlling for perceived personal harm (*Study 3*)

Figure 5. Effect of observer justice sensitivity and moral identity affirmation on moral

outrage at a corporation's sweatshop labor practices controlling for political orientation

(*Study 4*)

Figure 6. Effect of observer justice sensitivity and moral identity affirmation on support for

punishing corporations for sweatshop labor practices controlling for political orientation

(*Study 4*)