



Corporations are Cyborgs: Organizations elicit anger but not sympathy when they can think but cannot feel



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ABSTRACT

Across four experiments, participants saw companies as capable of having ‘agentic’ mental states, such as having intentions, but incapable of having ‘experiential’ mental states, such as feeling pain. This difference in mental state ascription caused companies to elicit anger as villains, but not sympathy as victims. Differences in sympathy were mediated by perceived capacities for experience. When participants had a background leading companies (i.e. senior executives) or when a recognizable brand (i.e. Google) was anthropomorphized, perceptions of experience increased and the sympathy gap disappeared. An organization seen as high in experience and low in agency (i.e. sports team) elicited more sympathy and less anger than companies. Our findings elucidate the mechanisms underlying the link between mental state ascription and moral judgment; the tendency to ascribe some mental states to organizations more easily than others; and the phenomenon whereby companies elicit anger as villains but fail to elicit sympathy as victims.

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Introduction

In 2013, the retail company Target was the victim of a hacking attack that compromised the personal information of over 70 million customers. As a result, some analysts have estimated that Target could be liable for anywhere between 400 million and 1.1 billion dollars to help banks cover fraudulent charges resulting from the security breach (Webb, 2014). Target was clearly the victim of a coordinated attack by organized criminals, but unlike other victims of crime the company elicited no sympathy. Rather, the company was blamed for putting its customers at risk due to inappropriate responses during the attack and insufficient preparation. Public sympathy was only expressed towards the Target customers whose data were compromised. Target may indeed have been negligent in protecting its customers’ data. Still, the complete absence of sympathy toward Target, and other companies that have suffered similar security breaches, is striking. Why has Target elicited only anger, while failing to elicit any sympathy?

People perceive ‘minds’ in groups (Waytz & Young, 2012), imbue brands with personality traits (Aaker, 1997) and use principles of

person-perception to guide their relationships with companies (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010; Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012; Jordan, Diermeier, & Galinsky, 2012). In the present paper, we ask whether this tendency to imbue groups and organizations with ‘minds’ extends to all mental states, and if not, how differences in the kinds of mental states that organizations are perceived as capable of having inform moral judgments of those organizations, both as villains and as victims of transgression. By investigating mental state ascription and moral judgment across individuals and organizations, we aim to establish both an asymmetry in the mental states that tend to ‘scale up’ from individuals to groups, as well as a fundamental link between mental state reasoning and moral judgment. In so doing, we provide an explanation for why companies often elicit anger as villains but fail to elicit sympathy as victims.

Agency, experience, and the mental capacities of companies

Gray, Gray, and Wegner (2007) have argued that people actually perceive minds in terms of two fundamental dimensions. The first dimension, referred to as *agency*, includes mental states related to thinking and taking actions, such as capacities for self-control, memory, learning, remembering, knowing, and intending. The second dimension, referred to as *experience*, includes mental states related to feelings, such as capacities for experiencing hunger, pain,

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and pleasure. Unlike the warmth and competence dimensions in the stereotype content model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), which refer to our perceptions of whether people or groups have good or bad intentions and how competent they are, the agency and experience dimensions focus on capacities to even have thoughts or feelings, regardless of their valence.

Using a pairwise comparison method, Gray et al. (2007) demonstrated that different types of actors actually vary in their perceived capacities for the mental states captured by the agentic and experiential dimensions. Thus, whereas participants saw human adults as being high in both agency and experience, they saw babies and non-human mammals as low in agency but high in experience, while they saw God and robots as high in agency but low in experience. Participants rated a dead person as comparatively low in both agency and experience.

Where do companies fall in this categorization? No organizations were present in Gray et al.'s (2007) survey. The closest evidence comes from Knobe and Prinz (2008), who argued that people see companies as high in 'intentionality', which loosely maps onto agency, but low in 'phenomenal consciousness', which loosely maps onto experience. In one study, participants rated sentences that expressed mental states tied to intentionality (e.g. "Acme Corp believes that its profit margin will soon increase"), as more natural than sentences that expressed mental states tied to phenomenal consciousness (e.g. "Acme Corp is getting depressed"), suggesting that people may be more willing to ascribe agency than experience to companies. The authors hypothesized that phenomenal consciousness is more sensitive to the physical constitution of the actor, and that because groups are actors composed of other actors, they are ineligible for having phenomenal consciousness. The authors did not provide an explanation for why phenomenal consciousness is more sensitive to the physical constitution of the actor than intentionality.

Strickland and Suben (2012) noted serious methodological concerns with Knobe and Prinz's (2008) studies, and suggested that the sentences the experimenters generated to test for 'naturalness' may have been biased by their entering hypotheses. Strickland and Suben (2012) found that sentences that expressed intentionality on the part of companies were only judged as more natural than sentences that expressed phenomenal-consciousness when they were generated by a separate set of participants with that hypothesis in mind. Sentences that expressed intentionality were not judged any more natural than sentences that expressed phenomenal consciousness when generated by participants testing the hypothesis that sentences expressing phenomenal consciousness would sound more natural. Thus, although Knobe and Prinz's (2008) findings are suggestive, they may not provide strong support for the claim that people see companies as capable of agentic but not experiential mental states, given that this was the hypothesis that the authors had in mind when generating the stimuli for their studies.

Sytsma and Machery (2009) and Phelan, Arico, and Nichols (2012) have suggested that Knobe and Prinz's (2008) effects may not be due to different beliefs about the mental capabilities of companies or groups per se. Rather, participants may interpret questions about groups as actually referring to the specific individuals that compose them and *the roles they play as members of those groups*. Thus, instead of reflecting different beliefs about the mental capabilities of people and organizations, participants' greater willingness to ascribe intentionality than phenomenal consciousness to companies is simply due to the fact that when people work in a company, they are more highly associated with behaviors that require intentionality, such as planning and goal-setting, than behaviors that require phenomenal consciousness, such as feeling joy or being hungry. This explanation suggests that if the behavior of members within an organization was more highly associated

with behaviors that require phenomenal consciousness, then the effects would reverse.

Regardless of whether organizations are actually seen as having 'minds' of their own or whether the people who compose those organizations are seen differently when they are in the role of a group member, these findings suggest that it may be more difficult to ascribe experience than agency to some organizations, and companies in particular. However, we do not actually know whether people will find it *more* difficult to ascribe experience to companies than to individuals in isolation, as Knobe and Prinz (2008) never actually compared the two; they simply assumed that people would judge differently if evaluating an individual person.

The link between mental state ascription and moral judgment

If experiential mental states indeed fail to scale up from people to companies to the same degree as agentic mental states, what are the consequences for moral judgment? Previous research has found that blame and anger are predicated on the perpetrator having intended and caused a transgression (Cushman, 2008). Thus, capacities for agency may be necessary to elicit blame because without it, a perpetrator would lack the mental capacities for intention and causal responsibility. Indeed, it has been found that when participants are motivated to blame actors, they also tend to ascribe greater intention to the actor's behaviors (Leslie, Knobe, & Cohen, 2006). Meanwhile, as feeling sympathy is predicated on taking the perspective of a victim who is in pain (Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978), capacities for experience may be necessary to elicit sympathy, because without it a victim would lack the mental capacities required for feeling pain and suffering.

In line with these predictions, Gray and Wegner (2009) found that when human targets were perceived to have more agency, they were blamed more as villains, and when they were perceived to have more experience, they elicited more sympathy as victims. At the organizational level, Haran (2013) found that companies were actually blamed less than individuals when they breached a contract after receiving a better offer. However, Haran (2013) argued that unlike contracts with individuals, contracts with companies were seen as morally neutral exchanges where the best offer wins, and hence, no moral violation was perceived to have occurred. When asked more generally about collective responsibility for actions by groups, Waytz and Young (2012) found that groups were responsible for their actions, but only when participants judged the group to have a 'mind'. Crucially, Waytz and Young (2012) operationalized 'minds' only in terms of agency, describing a mind as 'the capacity to make plans, have intentions, and think for itself'.

Regarding sympathy, research into the 'identifiable victim effect' has consistently found that groups of victims fail to elicit comparable levels of sympathy to an individual victim (Kogut & Ritov, 2005; Slovic, 2007; Small & Loewenstein, 2003). Investigations into these effects have focused on cognitive processing constraints on observers, such as limitations in their ability to vividly represent a group of victims compared to a single victim, or to think in terms of large absolute numbers rather than proportions. However, these studies have not examined the specific mental capacities that groups may be perceived as lacking compared to individuals that may serve as a mechanism underlying the sympathy gap. A single rock may be more easily mentally represented than a group of rocks, but we do not feel any more sympathy for it. In other words, there must be a role for cognitive appraisal of the mental capacities of the sufferer that make it *deserving* of sympathy. Moreover, the mechanisms thought to drive greater sympathy for individual victims, such as vividness and ease of mental representation, should also predict greater anger toward individual villains rather than large groups of villains. Although an identified

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