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Short Communication

Why are women less likely to support animal exploitation than men? The mediating roles of social dominance orientation and empathy


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ABSTRACT

Women tend to be more concerned about the welfare of (human/nonhuman) animals and the natural environment than men. A growing literature has shown that gender differences in environmental exploitation can be explained partially by the fact that women and men differ in their social dominance and empathic orientations. We extend past studies by examining whether social dominance orientation (SDO; ‘Superior groups should dominate inferior groups’) and empathy (‘I feel others’ emotions’) also help explain gender differences in attitudes towards nonhuman animals. Our mediation model confirmed that SDO and empathy partially and independently mediate gender differences in human supremacy beliefs (‘Animals are inferior to humans’) and/or speciesism (‘I think it is perfectly acceptable for cattle, chickens and pigs to be raised for human consumption’) among 1002 individuals (57% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 26.44$) from the general population in Portugal. These findings provide evidence that traits referring to human–human relations can help explain gender differences in human–animal relations. The cumulative evidence suggests that exploitative tendencies towards the natural environment and (human/nonhuman) animals may be built upon shared psychological mechanisms.

1. Introduction

There is ample empirical evidence on gender differences in human–environment and human–(nonhuman)animal relations. Compared to men, women tend to show higher levels of environmental concern and pro-environmental engagement, as well as being more concerned about animal suffering, to hold more positive attitudes towards animals and to be more engaged in animal protection (for reviews, see Amiot & Bastian, 2015; Herzog, 2007; Sakellari & Skanavis, 2013; Zelezny, Chua, & Aldrich, 2000). Recent studies have tried to explain the psychological mechanisms underpinning gender differences in human–environment relations. For example, individual differences in empathy and agreeableness have been found to mediate gender differences in pro-environmental behaviours (Arnocky and Stroink, 2010; Luchs & Mooradian, 2012). More recently, Milfont and Sibley (2016) used one-year longitudinal data to show that both social dominance orientation (SDO) and empathy partially accounted for gender differences in the endorsement of environmental protection.

These findings indicate that individual differences in orientations towards human–human relations can help explain why men and women

differ in their relations with the natural environment. However, and despite evidence of gender differences in key outcome variables in the field (see Amiot & Bastian, 2015; Herzog, 2007), the reasons why men and women differ in human–(nonhuman)animal relations remain largely unexplained. To our knowledge, no previous empirical study has addressed this question.

To address this gap in the literature, the present study draws on recent findings indicating that women display greater levels of environmentalism partially because of their higher levels of empathy and lower levels of SDO compared to men (Milfont & Sibley, 2016). It is known that women tend to be more empathic than men (Rueckert & Naybar, 2008), to express lower desire and support for group-based dominance and inequality (Dambrun, Duarte, & Guimond, 2004), and that SDO and empathy are intrinsically linked to each other (Sidanius et al., 2013). Moreover, SDO has been consistently linked to human-based hierarchical views towards the natural environment (Milfont, Richter, Sibley, Wilson, & Fischer, 2013, in press; Milfont & Sibley, 2014), as well as support for the exploitation of animals in favour of human interests and human supremacy beliefs (e.g., Dhont, Hodson, Costello, & MacInnis, 2014; Dhont, Hodson, & Leite, 2016).

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Adding to a growing literature investigating whether individual differences in orientations towards others are linked to non-human targets, we examined whether SDO and empathy may help explain why men and women differ in two constructs related to human–animal relations. *Human supremacy beliefs* express the view that humans are distinct from and superior to other animals (Dhont & Hodson, 2014). *Speciesism* refers to attitudes towards exploitation of animals in favour of human interests, where humans (the empowered group) use non-human animals for their own ends (Dhont et al., 2014). We expect that women will display lower levels of human supremacy beliefs and speciesism partly because women score lower in SDO and higher in empathy, whereas men will display higher levels of human supremacy beliefs and speciesism partly because men score higher in SDO and lower in empathy (see Milfont & Sibley, 2016). In other words, SDO and empathy will help explain why women and men differ in their attitudes towards nonhuman animals.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

We analysed online survey data hosted by Qualtrics. Participants from Portugal were recruited via ads in social media and rewarded with the choice to enter a draw to win a 7.9" 16GB tablet computer. The online survey was open for four months (between July 3rd 2014 and November 5th 2014). A total of 1278 participants clicked on the survey link but only 1002 completed the whole survey (572 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 26.44$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 9.54$, range: 18–64). Most had completed secondary (43.4%) or tertiary education (54.1%). Before starting the survey, participants were informed about the study and that participation was completely anonymous. Participants provided their consent and were debriefed after completing the survey.

2.2. Measures

The scale items are presented in full in the Supplementary Material in their original and Portuguese versions. Participants rated all scale items on a 5-point Likert-type scale anchored by 1 (*totally disagree*) and 5 (*totally agree*). The measures were presented to participants in the following order: *Social dominance orientation*, measured with Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, and Malle's (1994) 16-item scale; *Empathy*, measured with a 10-item scale from the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP; Goldberg, 2013); and *human supremacy beliefs* and *speciesism*, each measured with six items developed by Dhont and Hodson (2014) and Dhont et al. (2014), respectively.

2.3. Data analysis

The mediation structural equation model was construed in Mplus version 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2015) with robust maximum likelihood estimators and item parcels for each measure (see Supplementary material). When testing the indirect effects, we used a bootstrapping mediation method with 10,000 re-samples and bias-corrected confidence intervals.

3. Results

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics and correlations among the measures and Fig. 1 presents the model, which had acceptable fit to the data: $SB\chi^2 (N = 1002, df = 81) = 398.04, p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.063 [90% CI = 0.056, 0.069]; CFI = 0.95; SRMR = 0.041. Compared to women, men scored significantly higher in SDO ($\beta = 0.24, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.18, 0.30]$), human supremacy ($\beta = 0.11, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.05, 0.16]$) and speciesism ($\beta = 0.20, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.12, 0.28]$), while scoring significantly lower in empathy ($\beta = -0.37, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.43, -0.31]$).

The negative association between SDO and empathy ($\beta = -0.38, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.46, -0.30]$) is reflected in their associations with the measures assessing human–animal relations, which were highly correlated ($\beta = 0.82, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.76, 0.88]$). Greater SDO was associated with *higher* levels of human supremacy ($\beta = 0.29, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.22, 0.37]$) and speciesism ($\beta = 0.21, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.11, 0.31]$). In contrast, greater empathy was associated with *lower* levels of speciesism ($\beta = -0.14, p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.24, -0.03]$), but empathy was not reliably related to human supremacy in the structural equation model ($\beta = -0.06, p = 0.164, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.15, 0.03]$; but see Table 1).

We then examined the extent to which SDO and empathy mediated the observed gender differences in human supremacy beliefs and speciesism. Although gender had a direct association with human supremacy beliefs, gender also had a reliable total indirect effect on human supremacy via the mediators ($B = 0.15, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.05, 0.12]$). We partitioned the variance of this total indirect effect into the two specific indirect effects. These analyses showed that the indirect effect of gender on human supremacy via SDO was reliable ($B = 0.11, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.07, 0.16]$) but not the indirect effect via empathy ($B = 0.04, p = 0.178, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.01, 0.10]$)—expected given that the association between empathy and human supremacy was not statistically significant in the model.

Turning to the results for speciesism, gender had a direct association with speciesism but also a reliable total indirect effect via the mediators ($B = 0.08, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.05, 0.12]$). Partitioning the variance of this total indirect effect showed reliable mediational pathways of gender differences in speciesism via both SDO ($B = 0.04, p < 0.05, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.01, 0.08]$) and empathy ($B = 0.04, p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.02, 0.07]$). Moreover, a statistical comparison confirmed that these indirect effects were similar in magnitude ($B_{\text{contrast}} = 0.0001, p = 0.987, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.04, 0.05]$).

Additional analyses examined whether distinct mediation effects would emerge for the sub-dimensions of intergroup dominance (SDO-D) and intergroup anti-egalitarianism (SDO-E; see Stanley, Wilson, Sibley, & Milfont, 2017). Results for each of the SDO sub-dimensions mirror those reported above; the only distinction is that the direct effect of empathy on human supremacy beliefs becomes statistically significant when SDO-D or SDO-E are considered separately (see Supplementary Material).

4. Discussion

The present study addresses the question of why men and women differ in their relations with animals. It adds to a growing body of evidence investigating how traits referring to human relations are linked to non-human targets (e.g., Dhont et al., 2016; Milfont & Sibley, 2016; Milfont et al., 2013, in press). We expected that SDO and empathy would help explain gender differences in both human supremacy beliefs and speciesism. As anticipated, women showed lower levels of SDO, human supremacy beliefs and speciesism, and higher levels of empathy compared to men. These findings reinforce the role of gender both on human-(nonhuman)animal relations as well as on traits referring to human–human relations.

Importantly, both SDO and empathy partially and independently mediated the link between gender and speciesism. This suggests that women show decreased support for the exploitation of animals in favour of human interests partly because they tend to have lower levels of social dominance orientation and higher levels of empathy. Additionally, SDO partially mediated the link between gender and human supremacy beliefs, which suggests that women have decreased endorsement in humans as distinct from and superior to other animals partly because they tend to have lower levels of social dominance orientation. These results provide an extension of the Milfont and Sibley (2016) findings on the gender–environmentalism link applied to human–animal relations, and fit with the Social Dominance Human-

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