

THE SPIRAL OF INEQUALITIES IN WORK ORGANIZATIONS: FRAMING SOCIAL DOMINANCE THEORY AND THE INTERPERSONAL POWER INTERACTION MODEL

ALESSIO TESI
ANTONIO AIELLO
UNIVERSITY OF PISA

FELICIA PRATTO
UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

ANTONIO PIERRO
SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROMA

The present study examined the asymmetry hypothesis of social dominance theory (SDT) in a work organization. The asymmetry hypothesis posits that members of subordinate groups who are high in social dominance orientation (SDO; desire for group-based hierarchy) can contribute to maintaining hierarchies by conforming with hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths and tactics used by members of dominant groups. Focusing on subordinates' perspective, we studied their compliance with supervisors' use of harsh power tactics, and whether this increased with subordinates' levels of SDO. At a hierarchy-enhancing for-profit organization, 207 subordinate employees self-reported their compliance with supervisor's use of harsh influence tactics and the perceived use of those tactics by their supervisors. The moderation analysis confirmed that the concurrence between supervisors' use of harsh power tactics, as perceived by subordinates, and subordinates' compliance with harsh tactics was moderated by subordinates' SDO. The higher SDO subordinates perceived a higher supervisor's use of harsh power tactics, the more they were willing to comply with those tactics. As the asymmetry hypothesis implies, this pattern can maintain hierarchies and even contribute to a spiral of inequalities within work environment.

Key words: Groups; Work organization; Legitimizing myths; Social dominance orientation; Social power.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Alessio Tesi, Department of Political Sciences, University of Pisa, Via F. Serafini 3, 56126 Pisa (PI), Italy. E-mail: alessio.tesi@icloud.com

The present research used social dominance theory (SDT; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) as a framework for studying the maintenance of social inequalities in organizational settings (Caven & Nachmias, 2017). SDT posits that group-based hierarchies and inequalities are reproduced and maintained not only because of dominants' greater power, but in part due to compliance with that power by some members of subordinate groups. One factor that can partly unite people across groups in their desire to support group-based hierarchies is social dominance orientation (SDO; e.g., Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006).

Organizational contexts are an appropriate setting for studying coordination among people with different power and interests because cooperation among people with different roles is necessary for the smooth functioning of organizations (e.g., Haley & Sidanius, 2005). Although SDT has been studied in a wide range of fields, relatively little work has employed it in studies of organizations (O'Brien & Dietz,

2011). To help fill this gap, the present study focused on subordinates' contribution to inequality in an ordinary workplace. Linking SDT with the interpersonal power interaction model (IPIM; Raven, 1993; 2008; Raven, Schwarzwald, & Koslowsky, 1998), we studied subordinates' compliance with coercive power tactics that they believe are used by their supervisors. We hypothesized that the more subordinates perceived their bosses as "harsh" and coercive, the more they were inclined to comply with harsh power tactics that maintain their subordination, especially when they have high (vs. low) levels of SDO.

SOCIAL DOMINANCE THEORY

SDT (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) is a broadly-used approach that explains how group-based oppression is maintained. It analyzes such process at the individual, institutional, societal, and cultural levels (e.g., Lee, Pratto, & Johnson, 2011; Pratto et al., 2006). A central way that social hierarchies are sustained is through consensually-shared social ideologies, attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes, which are called legitimizing myths (e.g., see Lee et al., 2011). SDT posits that when dominant and subordinate groups manifest agreement rather than disagreement in endorsing legitimizing myths, they concur in preserving hierarchies and in maintaining stability in a specific social system (e.g., Pratto et al., 2006).

According to SDT, both dominant and subordinate groups can help to perpetuate group-based hierarchy, but in different ways. Dominant groups can perpetuate inequalities by relying on their controlling position in the hierarchical social structure, where their easy access to things of value and authority enables them not only to control assets, but also to control other people. The self-perpetuation of dominants' advantage leads to a spiral of oppression against members of subordinate groups (Aiello, Tesi, Pratto, & Pierro, 2018; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Tesi et al., 2019).

One bias that helps maintain inequality in subordinate groups is that their members do not show as much ingroup favoritism as members of dominant groups do (e.g., Pratto et al., 2006; Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009). According to SDT asymmetry hypothesis (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), members of subordinate groups sometimes collaborate in maintaining the unequal status quo through: i) expressing favoritism toward dominant groups instead than toward their own ingroup; ii) performing self-debilitating behaviors, which harm themselves and contribute to their subordination and suffering; iii) ideological asymmetry, with more concurrence between subordinates and dominants in beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and psychological processes that maintain hierarchy than difference between the groups.

Processes related to subordination and dominance have been shown to be both caused by and moderated by SDO (e.g., Khan, Moss, Quratulain, & Hameed, 2018, Kteily, Ho, & Sidanius, 2012), which correlates robustly with people's support for discriminatory policies and hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths, such as stereotypes and prejudices (e.g., Kteily et al., 2012; Kteily, Sidanius, & Levin, 2011; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). In studies around the world, the more people are high in SDO, the more they support particular intergroup hierarchies (e.g., Lee et al., 2011). People in high-status groups are more likely to discriminate against members of low-status groups, especially when they are also high in SDO (Halabi, Dovidio, & Nadler, 2008). Although on average, people in lower-status groups are lower on SDO than those in higher-status groups (Lee et al., 2011), SDO among members of subordinate groups can also contribute to group inequality by promoting their acceptance of legitimizing myths and cooperation with behaviors that favor dominant groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

THE INTERPERSONAL POWER INTERACTION MODEL

Workplace power relations are not as distal as other kinds of intergroup relations, so our analysis was extended by incorporating the interpersonal power interaction model (IPIM; Raven, 1993; 2008; Raven et al., 1998). The IPIM considers the process of social influence from the point of view of the user of power tactics (the influencing agent) and that of the target of power (the potential complier with influence tactics). The source of power, such as a supervisor in a work organization, can exert (or use) power by influencing a target of power. The target of power, such as a subordinate, has agency in deciding whether to comply, or not, with the supervisor's influence tactics (Raven et al., 1998). Based on the original model by French and Raven (1959) and Raven (1965), the IPIM proposes a taxonomy of 11 bases of power (means of influence), namely: "expert," "informational," "referent power," "legitimacy of dependence," "legitimacy of reciprocity," "legitimacy of position," "legitimacy of equity," "personal and interpersonal coercion," and "personal and impersonal reward" (Raven, 2008; Raven et al., 1998).

Further studies on the IPIM show that the 11 power bases can be grouped into two categories: *harsh* and *soft* power tactics (Raven et al., 1998). Soft and harsh distinguish the potential harm the target of power will experience if she/he chooses not to comply with the influence agent's requests or demands (Raven, 1993). Soft power tactics, such as presenting oneself as an expert or offering valuable information to the target (the "expert" and "informational" influence tactics, respectively), predict less harm to the target than do harsh power tactics, such as coercion and punishment (negative reward). Even if subordinates disapprove of such tactics, they may manifest high compliance with harsh tactics to obtain rewards or avoid punishments (see Kelman, 2006).

Note that if a target chooses to comply, it has provided her/his agency to the advantage of the agent of influence, thus reducing her/his degrees of freedom in deciding to be compliant or not. Using subordinates' agency towards the agenda of hierarchy maintenance is an important way that dominants' harsh influence tactics lead subordinates to collaborate in maintaining their subordinate position. Subordinates' compliance also provides public evidence for the dominants' authority, which can reinforce the dominants' "legitimacy of position" and "referent" power. The present study focused on harsh power tactics because of their greater potential contribution in maintaining group hierarchies (Aiello et al., 2018; Pierro, De Grada, Raven, & Kruglanski, 2004).

SDO AND HARSH POWER TACTICS

Recent studies showed that SDO is positively associated with endorsing harsh power tactics among both subordinates and supervisors in different organizational settings (Aiello et al., 2018; Tesi et al., 2019). Such research thus links the influence tactics from IPIM with hierarchy-maintaining collaboration between dominants and subordinates from SDT. However, that research did not measure the actual *concurrency* between dominants and subordinates, nor whether their coordination around harsh tactics is facilitated by higher SDO levels (Aiello, Pratto, & Pierro, 2013; Aiello et al., 2018).

In organizational research, this sort of matching between the outlooks of subordinates and supervisors has been called person-supervisor fit (P-S fit; e.g., Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Su, Murdock, & Rounds, 2015), which is the correspondence between specific ideologies, values, interests, orientations, and behaviors of a person (a subordinate) and his/her supervisor. In work environments, the P-S fit can lead to better outcomes in organizational stability and functioning, and in employees' performance and well-being (Su et al., 2015). Experiments and field studies show that organizations tend to be sought out by

and to recruit employees whose levels of SDO match the organization hierarchy-enhancing or -attenuating style (Haley & Sidanius, 2005, Pratto, Stallworth, Sidanius, & Siers, 1997). As such, supervisors and subordinates of the same organization will often have SDO levels, ideologies, and worldviews that match (Haley & Sidanius, 2005).

The P-S fit can be understood as a complementary but asymmetric relationship between subordinates and supervisors from the perspective of SDT. Fit between supervisors and subordinates is not expected to be an egalitarian process with equal influence from both sides. Rather, the power difference between supervisors and subordinates itself will suggest to subordinates that their supervisor will use harsh power tactics, and therefore that the subordinate should comply with those tactics. The P-S fit here coordinates the supervisor's role and associated influence tactics with actual compliance by the subordinates. The P-S fit in this complementary coordination through harsh power tactics could lead to a spiral of oppression especially for subordinates higher in SDO, driving a recursive process in which the more a supervisor is perceived to support for harsh tactics, the more subordinates will comply with those tactics. Further, applying the ideological asymmetry hypothesis, we hypothesized that subordinates' SDO moderates the association between supervisors' use of harsh power tactics as perceived by subordinates and subordinates' compliance with harsh tactics. Because hierarchy-enhancing organizations support asymmetrical relationships, they are an ideal context for studying how employees — even subordinates — support group dominance (Aiello et al., 2018; Haley & Sidanius, 2005).

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

We recruited participants from a for-profit company specializing in manufacturing personal accessories, like earrings and bracelets. This environment can be considered a hierarchy-enhancing organization because it largely serves wealthy people and promotes economic inequalities (Haley & Sidanius, 2005). Also, this organization focuses on maximizing profit and promotes stable hierarchical relationships among workgroups.

We recruited only participants who had a subordinate role — the entry-level position of the organizational chart. Participants' jobs consist storing materials and using specific machines to manufacture wearable products. With the approval of the organization's leadership, we emailed 238 subordinate employees at their company email address to invite their participation in the study. Two-hundred and seven participants ($N = 207$) volunteered to participate in the research (response rate = 86.97%). Participants completed the anonymous online questionnaires during working hours in sessions supervised by the researchers and with no supervisors present.

Participants included 83 females and 124 males. Participants' mean age was of 37.39 years ($SD = 9.75$) and they had on average 10.71 ($SD = 8.52$) years of working experience. Thirty-four participants had a middle school diploma, 133 had a high school diploma, 32 participants had a degree, and eight had a post-graduate degree.

Measures

Social dominance orientation. Subordinates' SDO was measured using the Italian adaptation (Aiello, Morselli, Tesi, Passini, & Pratto, 2017) of the English-language SDO Scale (version 7; Ho et al.,

2015). The Italian scale is a self-report measure composed of 16 items to which responses are given using a 7-point Likert scale (0 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*). A sample item is: “Some groups of people must be kept in their place.” Cronbach’s alpha for this study was .87.

Harsh power tactics. We used the Italian version (Pierro et al., 2004) of the Worker’s Format of the Interpersonal Power Inventory (IPI; Raven et al., 1998) to assess both how much subordinates perceived their supervisors to use harsh tactics and how much subordinates reported complying with those tactics.

Instructions for assessing the supervisors’ use of harsh tactics read in part: “Often supervisors ask subordinates to do their job somewhat differently. Sometimes subordinates resist doing so or do not follow the supervisor’s directions exactly. Other times, they will do exactly as their supervisor requests. We are interested in examining what behaviors supervisors use for gaining compliance.”

The questionnaire presents 18 statements, each of which describes a particular harsh tactic. An example item is “My supervisor reminds me that, as a subordinate, I have an obligation to do as he/she says.” Subordinates were asked to indicate how often supervisors use these tactics by rating each on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *very rarely used* to 7 = *very often used*. Cronbach’s alpha for this study was .81.

Instructions for assessing subordinates’ compliance with harsh power tactics read in part: “Often supervisors ask subordinates to do their job somewhat differently. Sometimes subordinates resist doing so or do not follow the supervisor’s directions exactly. Other times, they will do exactly as their supervisor requests. We are interested in those situations which lead subordinates to follow the requests of their supervisor.” For each of 18 statements (e.g., “As a subordinate, I had an obligation to do as my supervisor said”), participants were asked to indicate the extent to which the power tactic is a *good personal reason to comply* with supervisor’s request, responding on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *definitely not a reason to comply* to 7 = *definitely a reason to comply*. Cronbach’s alpha for this study was .80.

Analyses

Our hypothesis implies that any given subordinate should be more likely to report high compliance with the supervisor’s harsh tactics to the extent the subordinate is high on SDO. Thus, perceiving the supervisor to use harsh tactics should correspond to subordinates’ believing there is good reason to comply with the tactic, and this association should be augmented by subordinates’ SDO. We tested the hypothesized effect of perceived supervisor’s harshness and its interaction with subordinates’ SDO on subordinates’ reported compliance using a moderation analysis with a multiple linear regression approach (Aiken, West, & Reno, 1991). We also performed a simple slope analysis to test whether the magnitude of the association was different on the basis of different levels of the moderator (+1 *SD*/–1 *SD* for SDO). Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS and the Process Macro (Hayes, 2018; Model 1). To reduce multicollinearity, we standardized variables before running the regression analysis. We also entered the following covariates: gender, age, and work seniority (Aiello et al., 2013).

RESULTS

We first tested for concurrence between subordinates’ compliance with harsh tactics and their perception that supervisors used them. As the large correlation in Table 1 shows ($r = .51$), there was high concurrence. Correlations also showed that subordinates both perceive and comply with harsh tactics to the extent they are higher on SDO, replicating Aiello et al. (2013, 2018; see Table 1). This result is consistent with the idea that SDO helps coordinate the belief systems and behaviors involved in subordinate compliance.

TABLE 1
 Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables ($N = 207$)

| Variable | Mean (<i>SD</i>) | 1 | 2 |
|--|--------------------|-------|-------|
| 1. SDO | 1.43 (0.88) | | |
| 2. Harsh power tactics (supervisor's use as perceived by subordinates) | 2.30 (0.65) | .25** | |
| 3. Harsh power tactics (subordinates' compliance) | 2.12 (0.80) | .31** | .51** |

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Results (Table 2) showed that the perceived use of supervisor harsh tactics was associated with subordinates' compliance with harsh power tactics, and the predicted moderation of that effect by subordinates' SDO was statistically significant ($b = .12, p < .05$). None of the covariates was reliable. The regression model explained 29% of total variance of subordinates' compliance to harsh power tactics ($R^2 = .29, p < .001$).

TABLE 2
 Moderation analysis ($N = 207$)

| Predictors | Harsh power tactics (subordinates' compliance) | |
|---|--|-------------|
| | <i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>) | [95% CI] |
| Harsh power tactics (supervisors' use as perceived by subordinates) | .43** (.07) | [.30, .57] |
| SDO | .10† (.07) | [-.03, .23] |
| Harsh power tactics (supervisors' use as perceived by subordinates) × SDO | .12* (.06) | [.01, .23] |
| Covariates | | |
| Gender | .08 (.12) | [-.32, .17] |
| Age | .09 (.12) | [-.32, .17] |
| Work seniority | -.11 (.12) | [-.35, .13] |

Note. *SE* = standard error.

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

This moderation analysis showed that SDO increases the association between subordinates perceiving that their supervisors use harsh tactics and subordinates' compliance. To illustrate the interaction, we performed a simple slope analysis (Aiken et al., 1991). We compared the magnitude of the association between supervisors' tactics and subordinates' compliance for SDO levels that were +1 or -1 *SD* from mean SDO.

The simple slope analysis (see Figure 1) demonstrated that the association between perceived supervisors' use of harsh power tactics and subordinates' compliance with these tactics was tighter for people high in SDO, $b = .55, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.40, .70]$, than for people low in SDO, $b = .32, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [.12, .51]$, although the concurrence was positive for both high and low SDO people.

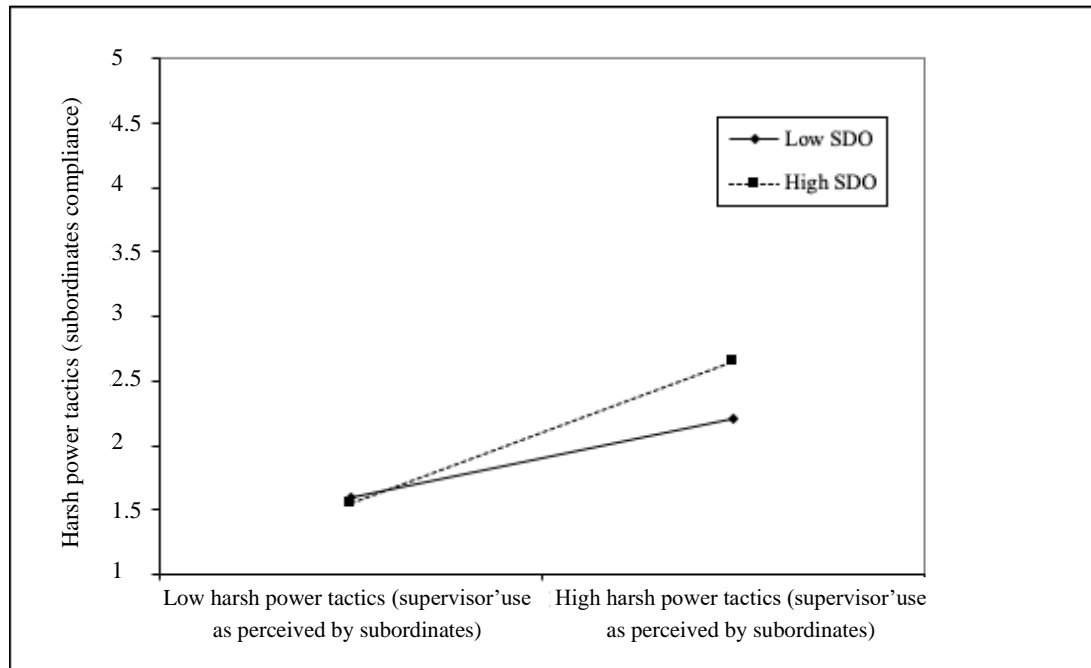


FIGURE 1
Simple slope analysis ($N = 207$).

DISCUSSION

The present study represents a first attempt to test the asymmetry hypothesis of SDT in work environments, framing the P-S fit within an understanding of persistent hierarchy and inequality. Behavioral asymmetry means that even though dominants and subordinates may behave in different ways, they cooperate in maintaining hierarchies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Our study tested for a particular kind of behavioral asymmetry between dominants and subordinates observed in prior studies of interpersonal power: the successful use of harsh power by work supervisors to gain their subordinates' compliance (e.g., Pierro et al., 2004). As expected, results showed that subordinates who perceive their supervisors to use harsh power tactics generally concur that it is reasonable to comply with such tactics. The study thus demonstrates the P-S fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Su et al., 2015) between subordinates and their supervisors regarding harsh power tactics.

Going beyond the P-S fit concept, we tested for ideological asymmetry between subordinates and supervisors, namely, whether being higher on SDO would especially facilitate the match between subordinates' perceptions and acquiescence to harsh power tactics. Results of the moderation analysis confirmed this hypothesis. Harsh power tactics are a coercive method of limiting subordinates' freedom in deciding whether to be compliant with supervisors (Pierro et al., 2004; Raven, 2008; Raven et al., 1998). Thus, subordinates' compliance with expected harsh power tactics by dominants demonstrates compatibility with dominants favoring such tactics (Aiello et al., 2013; Tesi et al., 2019), consistent with the behavioral asymmetry hypothesis of SDT (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

The present work is a novel application of SDT ideological asymmetry hypothesis because prior research has tested it on whether SDO is more strictly associated with hierarchy-enhancing behaviors and

beliefs in dominant groups than in subordinate groups (e.g., Thomsen et al., 2010). By considering SDT behavioral asymmetry hypothesis, or, more generally, why people may cooperate in maintaining hierarchies in which they are subordinated, we reasoned that, in a hierarchical workplace, having higher SDO may facilitate the concurrence concerning hierarchy-maintaining influence tactics among subordinates.

In line with previous studies (Aiello et al., 2013, 2018), results confirmed that higher-SDO subordinates will preserve hierarchies by complying with harsh power tactics. Research suggests a coordination of psychological and influence processes that maintain hierarchies within workplaces. In hierarchy-enhancing environments, where most members are higher on SDO (e.g., Pratto et al., 1997, Haley & Sidanius 2005), supervisors report using harsh influence tactics on their employees to the extent they are high on SDO (Aiello et al., 2013), and the present research shows that subordinates agree to comply with those tactics when they are high on SDO.

The results of the present study support the idea that a spiral of oppression takes place in work organizations by harsh power tactics becoming normative within the organizational culture (Aiello et al., 2018). Because harsh power tactics are “accepted” or at least publicly complied with by subordinate employees, such tactics appear to be one of the “right ways” to manage asymmetrical relationships. When such norms are in place, subordinates, particularly those high in SDO, can discriminate against peers who do not manifest high compliance with harsh tactics, another process that can help sustain asymmetrical relationships in settings in which inequalities are rooted in organizational functioning (e.g., Aiello et al., 2018; Haley & Sidanius, 2005).

Our study does have several limitations. We cannot tell from our data whether the compatibility between perceived supervisors’ tactics and subordinates’ intentions to comply with those tactics is due only to the way subordinates perceive things, or to other P-S fit processes, such as supervisors selecting subordinates who share their views of how relationships between supervisors and subordinates should be, or re-assignment of subordinates to facilitate such matching (Haley & Sidanius, 2005, Pratto et al. 1997). More detailed observational studies are necessary to test such possibilities. Further, the present study focused exclusively on subordinates’ point of view. Future research could measure the supervisors’ actual use of harsh power tactics and to what extent they correspond with subordinates’ beliefs, and whether and on whom those tactics are effective.

Moreover, the present study was conducted in a specific for-profit organization (i.e., hierarchy-enhancing work environment), where employees are more likely to have higher levels of SDO compared to hierarchy-attenuating organizations (e.g., non-profit, humanitarian, and health-care organizations; Aiello et al., 2018; Haley & Sidanius, 2005). Participants’ relatively high SDO levels more likely to be observed in hierarchy-enhancing organizations (Aiello et al., 2018), might have contributed to the fact that there was a reliably positive association between perceived power tactics and reported compliance with those tactics even among those who were a standard deviation below the mean level of SDO. The present results may not generalize to hierarchy-attenuating organizations and to organizations whose norms or policies strive to eliminate systematic inequality, such as gender, age, or race discrimination. An important direction for future research is to test whether these other kinds of organizations have a different spiral of compliance against harsh power tactics and/or in favor of mutual respect for both subordinates’ and supervisors’ agency.

Workplaces are a very common environment for people to experience dominance-subordination relationships, find them legitimate, and see cooperating as a way to further at least some of their interests (e.g., a reliable income, belonging). Patriarchal families, in which the father has authority and at the same time shows concern for the interests of subordinated family members, are another commonly experienced environment where people find dominance relationships both ordinary and secure (Lee, 2013). Further re-

search in such everyday sites of dominance may continue to reveal how ideologies and behaviors of people in dominant and subordinated positions coordinate, and suggest how SDO develops, and why hierarchies are acceptable even to people who do not particularly benefit from inequality.

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