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What is This?
Moral Suspicion Trickles Down

Takuya Sawaoka¹ and Benoît Monin¹,²

Abstract
In social hierarchies, moral stigma spreads down more than up. Across four vignette studies, exposure to the immoral behaviors of higher (vs. lower) ranking group members led online participants to report greater moral suspicion toward other group members (moral spillover). A higher ranking organization member’s deceptive practices were perceived as more prototypical, resulting in more negative moral impressions of the organization (Study 1). This more negative moral impression led people to rate ambiguous behavior by another organization member as more suspicious—even when the prior transgression was purely self-serving (Study 2). These effects generalized across several types of moral transgressions (Study 3). Finally, a higher ranking organization member’s unethical behavior led other organization members to receive more negative job-hiring recommendations (Study 4). Thus, a higher ranking group member’s ethical violations result in greater moral spillover, affecting not only other group members’ moral reputations but their career prospects as well.

Keywords
social rank, moral cognition, stigma, spillover effects, hierarchy

Nearly a decade after the collapse of Enron, many of the company’s former employees continue to feel the weight of the scandal. More than the loss of their jobs and retirement savings, many former employees resent the public’s perception that the vast majority of Enron workers were corrupt (Associated Press, 2011). They maintain that only a few Enron executives acted unethically. Their experiences suggest that merely being associated with the name Enron carries a moral stigma, eliciting distrust and suspicion from others. Researchers refer to this phenomenon as moral spillover (Uhlmann, Zhu, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2012), in which the immoral actions of one individual lead people to develop negative moral impressions of other associated individuals.

One noteworthy feature of many such corporate scandals is that the people implicated in the corruption were powerful, higher ranking executives. Immoral behaviors can be committed by less powerful people, as when lower level employees are accused of skimming, and nurses of Medicare fraud (Applewhite, 2013). But in those cases, the consequences for the organization as a whole are typically less severe. One secretary’s fraudulent activities are unlikely to send the organization spiraling into bankruptcy, compared to the same behaviors by a CEO. Here, we propose that a moral transgressor’s social rank also affects the extent to which moral stigma spreads to associated individuals; we suggest that the unethical behaviors of a higher (vs. lower) ranking individual result in greater moral spillover, leading to more negative moral impressions of associated others.

How might social rank influence moral spillover? We propose that social rank affects how much an individual’s immoral behavior taints perceptions of that person’s group. Previous research suggests that the immoral behaviors of higher (vs. lower) ranking group members are typically more diagnostic of the group’s overall moral character. First, higher ranking individuals have more interpersonal influence over others (Fast & Chen, 2009; Magee & Galinsky, 2008), so that unethical norms are more likely to spread from higher to lower ranking individuals than vice versa. Indeed, considerable work has examined the importance of leaders’ ethical behavior in shaping the ethical climate of an organization (Dickson, Smith, Grojean, & Ehrhart, 2001; Schminke, Ambrose, & Neubaum, 2005; Sims, 2000; Sims & Brinkman, 2003; Treviño, Hartman, & Brown, 2000). Second, leaders are perceived to be more effective when they are prototypical group members (i.e., have the normative characteristics of a particular group; Hais, Hogg, & Duck, 1997), suggesting that more representative or prototypical group members may be particularly likely to rise to higher ranking positions. Thus, people may infer that when a higher ranking group member engages in unethical behavior, the whole group is also likely to have poor moral character.

This tainted perception of the group then impacts how people evaluate other group members. Through self-fulfilling
prophecies and confirmation biases, expectancies regarding groups can shape perceptions of other group members. People with negative moral impressions of a group are predisposed to perceive group members as immoral. In this way, we propose that if higher ranking transgressors lead to negative moral impressions of a group, this results in greater moral spillover to other group members.

In summary, we propose that moral spillover—in which an individual’s immoral actions lead to negative moral evaluations of associated others—is influenced by the transgressor’s social rank. When higher ranking group members act unethically, people form a more negative moral impression of the group (e.g., infer that other group members also act unethically). This perception results in more moral suspicion toward other group members. A transgressor’s social rank magnifies moral spillover, making moral stigma particularly likely to be passed from higher to lower ranking group members. We note that in the present research, we did not distinguish between various components of social rank such as power and status (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Although power and status differentially affect impression formation (Fragale, Overbeck, & Neale, 2011), we theorize that both higher power and higher status individuals would likely be perceived as more prototypical of the group and thus have comparable effects on moral spillover.

We conducted four studies to test these predictions. Study 1 examined whether a higher ranking moral transgressor is perceived as more prototypical and leads to more negative moral impressions of the group. Study 2 tested whether a higher ranking moral transgressor results in more moral suspicion toward another group member. Study 3 explored the generalizability of this effect across multiple types of moral transgressions and using more realistic stimuli. Finally, Study 4 extended these findings to examine whether a higher ranking moral transgressor causes another group member to be rejected for a new job.

Study 1

We first tested our prediction that a higher ranking group member’s unethical behaviors would be perceived as more prototypical of the group, resulting in more negative moral impressions of the group.

Method

Participants

Participants (n = 60; 26 women; mean age = 32.67, SD = 11.33) were recruited and compensated through Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011).

Procedure

Participants first completed an attention check (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009). Next, they were presented with a structural representation of an organization (see Figure 1; Zitek & Tiedens, 2012). Individuals occupying higher positions in the diagram were described as having more status and rank. Participants were randomly assigned to read vignettes in which an organization member, who was either higher ranking (Bill) or lower ranking (Mark), had engaged in unethical business practices (e.g., deceptive marketing; see Supplementary Online Materials for full text of the vignettes).

Next, participants indicated how much they perceived this organization member’s actions to be prototypical of the group. They responded to 2 items, “I feel that Bill’s (Mark’s) actions reflect the character of the organization as a whole” and “I feel that Bill’s (Mark’s) behaviors are representative of the organization’s practices more generally”; (r = .78, p < .001). Participants also provided their moral impression of the organization using 1 item, “I suspect that unethical business practices are common in this organization.” All items used 7-point scales (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree).

Results

Participants were excluded from analyses if they failed the attention check (n = 4).1

Perceived Prototypicality

The unethical behaviors of the higher ranking organization member were perceived as more prototypical of the organization (M = 4.98, SD = 1.51) than those of the lower ranking member (M = 2.96, SD = 1.31), t(54) = 5.32, p < .001, d = 1.43.

Moral Impression of the Group

The higher ranking transgressor led to more negative moral impressions of the organization (M = 4.97, SD = 1.38) than the lower ranking transgressor (M = 3.81, SD = 1.42), t(54) = 3.10, p = .003, d = 0.83.
Mediation

To examine mediation, we entered rank as the independent variable, perceived prototypicality as the mediator, and moral impression of the group as the dependent variable (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). We used 5,000 bootstrapping resamples to estimate the bias-corrected and accelerated confidence interval for the indirect effect. The indirect effect was significant, 95% CI: [0.392, 1.045].

Discussion

As predicted, we found that the unethical behaviors of a higher ranking group member were perceived as more prototypical, resulting in more negative moral impressions of the group.

Study 2

Study 1 demonstrated that higher (vs. lower) ranking transgressors led to more negative moral impressions of the group. Study 2 examined whether this negative moral evaluation of the group would impact impressions of another group member (i.e., moral spillover).

We also sought to address one alternative explanation for the results of Study 1. Because higher ranking organization members would be most likely to reap the benefits of unethical business practices that profit the organization, people might infer that higher ranking moral transgressors trained lower ranking members to use unethical practices for the organization’s benefit. If this were true, a higher ranking moral transgressor may lead to more negative moral impressions of a group simply because people believe that the transgressor had explicitly instructed the rest of the group to be unethical. In contrast, we contend that the mere perception of prototypicality associated with high rank is sufficient to lead to greater moral spillover, even without the inference that corrupt practices have been directly transmitted through hierarchical instruction. Thus, in Study 2, we conducted a conservative test of our hypothesis by examining immoral behaviors that people should not expect to be explicitly transmitted through an organization, because they benefit the transgressor but not the organization.

In Study 2, we presented participants with vignettes describing a higher or lower ranking group member’s unethical behavior, and also manipulated whether this unethical behavior benefited the moral transgressor at the expense of the group (i.e., reflecting self-serving motives) or benefited the group as a whole (i.e., reflecting group-serving motives). Participants then read another vignette describing an ambiguous ethical violation committed by another group member, and reported their levels of moral suspicion toward this individual. We predicted that a higher ranking transgressor would lead to more negative moral impressions of the group (as in Study 1), resulting in greater moral suspicion toward another group member, and that this would occur even when the transgressor’s behavior reflected self-serving motives.

Method

Participants

Participants (n = 191; 88 women; mean age = 31.83, SD = 10.46) were recruited and compensated through Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk.

Procedure

Participants first completed the attention check used in Study 1. They were then presented with the same structural representation of an organization as in Study 1. Participants read a vignette in which either higher ranking or lower ranking organization members committed unethical behavior driven by either group-serving or self-serving motives (see Supplementary Online Materials). In the group-serving motive condition, the organization member had misrepresented his organization’s financial status to his clients and presented unrealistically positive financial projections, providing extra revenue to the organization. In contrast, in the self-serving motive condition, the organization member had inflated records of his performance and work hours in order to receive a larger bonus at the organization’s expense. Participants provided their moral impressions of the group using 1 item, “I suspect that it is common for others in this organization to engage in unethical business practices.”

Next, participants were presented with another vignette describing a different group member who engaged in potentially unethical behavior. According to this vignette, “Chris” was accused of knowingly providing a client with fraudulent investment advice, convincing the client to invest money into risky accounts that later incurred losses. The client alleged that Chris’ organization had ownership interest in one of these accounts. Chris denied the charges, noting that the accounts he invested the client’s money into had all been profitable until recently. Moral suspicion toward Chris was assessed with 3 items (e.g., “I suspect that Chris provided the client with false information about the safety of these investment accounts,” α = .93). All items used 7-point scales (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). As an additional attention check, participants were asked to complete an open-ended response explaining why a dissatisfied client had filed a complaint against Chris.

Results

Participants were excluded from analyses if they failed the initial attention check (n = 13) or did not accurately describe why a dissatisfied client had filed a complaint against Chris (n = 9). We conducted 2 (rank: high vs. low) × 2 (motive: group-serving vs. self-serving) analyses of variance (ANOVs) on moral impressions of the group and moral suspicion toward another group member.
Negative Moral Impression of the Group

We found a main effect of rank (see Figure 2), $F(1, 165) = 4.25, p = .041, \eta^2_p = .03$, such that participants reported more negative moral impressions of the organization after reading about the higher ranking transgressor ($M = 4.42, SD = 1.40$) than the lower ranking transgressor ($M = 3.91, SD = 1.58$), even when the transgressions were purely self-serving and at the expense of the organization, $F(1, 165) = 4.12, p = .044, \eta^2_p = .02$. We also found a main effect of motive, $F(1, 165) = 9.32, p = .003, \eta^2_p = .05$, such that participants reported more negative moral impressions of the organization after reading about an organization member who acted unethically on group-serving motives ($M = 4.52, SD = 1.39$) rather than self-serving motives ($M = 3.82, SD = 1.54$), but there was no interaction, $p = .411$.

Moral Suspicion Toward Another Group Member

We found a main effect of rank (see Figure 3), $F(1, 165) = 10.46, p = .001, \eta^2_p = .06$, such that participants reported more moral suspicion toward the other organization member after reading about the higher ranking transgressor ($M = 5.02, SD = 1.47$) than the lower ranking transgressor ($M = 4.25, SD = 1.50$), even when the transgressions were purely self-serving and at the expense of the organization, $F(1, 165) = 8.32, p = .004, \eta^2_p = .05$. We also found a main effect of motive, $F(1, 165) = 4.60, p = .033, \eta^2_p = .03$, such that participants reported significantly more moral suspicion toward the other organization member after reading about an organization member who acted unethically on group-serving motives ($M = 4.91, SD = 1.44$) rather than self-serving motives ($M = 4.40, SD = 1.59$). There was no interaction, $p = .387$.

Mediation

To examine mediation, we entered rank, motive, and their interaction as independent variables, moral impression of the group as the mediator, and moral suspicion as the dependent variable. We used 5,000 bootstrapping resamples to estimate the bias-corrected and accelerated confidence interval for the indirect effect. The indirect effect of rank on moral suspicion through moral impression of the group was significant, 95% CI: [0.005, 0.164].

Discussion

We found that the unethical behaviors of a higher (vs. lower) ranking group member led to more negative moral impressions of the group (replicating the results of Study 1), resulting in greater moral suspicion toward another group member. These findings demonstrate that a moral transgressor’s social rank magnifies moral spillover. In addition, this effect occurred even when the moral transgressor acted on self-serving motives, benefiting the transgressor at the expense of the group. This provides evidence against an alternative interpretation of our previous findings, in which higher ranking transgressors signal that the organization itself benefits from the corruption and thus may demand it of its members. Indeed, we found a main effect of the moral transgressor’s motive on moral spillover, such that a moral transgressor’s group-serving (vs. self-serving) motives led to greater moral spillover. But the fact that we did not observe an interaction...
between motive and rank suggests that higher ranking transgressors are perceived as more prototypical even when the transgression hurts the organization. Because moral transgressors’ rank affected moral spillover when motives were self-serving, this suggests that the effect of rank on spillover is unlikely to be due merely to the greater attribution of group-serving motives when higher ranking group members transgress.

**Study 3**

Studies 1 and 2 focused primarily on ethical violations in the financial sector (e.g., deceptive marketing). In Study 3, we examined the generalizability of the present findings by including a broader set of moral transgressions. Drawing on recent ethical issues in scientific research (Callaway, 2011) and medical practice (Pear, 2012), we created vignettes encompassing a wider range of ethical violations.

In addition, in Study 2 we included an ambiguous moral transgression that the target of moral spillover may have committed. However, we were interested to determine whether the effect of a moral transgressor’s social rank on moral spillover would emerge even in the absence of such suspicious information. Therefore, in Study 3, the only information we presented regarding the target of moral spillover was this individual’s social rank and shared group membership with the moral transgressor. Finally, Study 3 used richer, more realistic stimuli. Instead of the schematic three-level organizational flowchart with first names used in Studies 1 and 2, the flowchart used in Study 3 was larger, more realistic, and involved first and last names.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants (n = 303; 117 women; mean age = 29.65, SD = 9.89) were recruited and compensated through Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk.

**Procedure**

Participants were presented with a structural representation of an organization (see Figure 4). This schematic was more elaborate than the one used in Studies 1 and 2, which intended to capture the organizational complexity present in most real groups. Participants were then presented with vignettes in which either a higher ranking or a lower ranking organization member (Daniel Glick or Sam Thompson) committed unethical behavior. They read one of three vignettes (see Supplementary Online Materials) describing ethical violations in scientific research (fabricating data in scientific reports), medical practice (overprescribing medication to patients due to financial incentives from drug companies), or marketing (misrepresenting one’s organization during negotiations). Participants then provided their moral impressions of the group, indicating the extent to which they perceived the
organization to be dishonest, harmful, trustworthy, and ethical (the latter 2 items were reverse coded; 1 = Not at all to 7 = Extremely; α = .87).

Next, they were asked to consider “Jonathan Clark,” another member of the organization, who appeared between Daniel Glick and Sam Thompson in the organizational chart. In contrast to Study 2, participants were not provided with any ambiguous information about this other person. Participants responded to 3 items assessing their moral suspicion toward Jonathan, “I suspect that Jonathan engages in questionable business practices,” “I distrust Jonathan’s moral integrity as an employee,” and “I trust that Jonathan conducts his work in an ethical way” (reverse coded; 1 = Strongly disagree to 6 = Strongly agree; α = .82). As an attention check, participants were asked to summarize the vignette they had read.

Results
Participants were excluded from analyses if they did not accurately describe the ethical violation they read about (n = 21). We conducted 2 (rank: high vs. low) × 3 (vignette: data fabrication, overprescribing medications, or misrepresentation) ANOVAs on moral impressions of the group and moral suspicion toward another group member.

**Negative Moral Impression of the Group**
We found a significant main effect of rank (see Figure 5), F(1, 276) = 31.19, p < .001, η²p = .10, such that participants reported more negative moral impressions of the group after reading about the transgressions of a higher ranking group member (M = 4.48, SD = 1.16) than of a lower ranking group member (M = 3.74, SD = 1.08). No other effects were significant, ps ≥ .149.

**Moral Suspicion Toward Another Group Member**
We found a significant main effect of rank (see Figure 6), F(1, 276) = 5.18, p = .024, η²p = .02, such that participants reported more moral suspicion toward the other group member after reading about the transgressions of a higher ranking group member (M = 3.48, SD = .88) than of a lower ranking group member (M = 3.25, SD = .87). No other effects were significant, ps ≥ .356.

**Mediation**
To examine mediation, we entered rank, vignette, and their interaction as independent variables, moral impression of the group as the mediator, and moral suspicion as the dependent variable. We used 5,000 bootstrapping resamples to estimate the bias-corrected and accelerated confidence interval for the indirect effect. The indirect effect of rank on moral suspicion through moral impression of the group was significant, 95% CI: [0.080, 0.211].

Discussion
Study 3 provides evidence for the generalizability of our findings to other kinds of moral transgressions. Across three disparate types of ethical violations—scientists engaging in data fabrication, physicians overprescribing medication for financial gain, and members of a marketing firm misrepresenting their organization during negotiations—we found that the transgressions of higher ranking individuals led to greater moral spillover. Moreover, in contrast to Study 2 where the target of moral spillover was involved in an ambiguous ethical violation, in Study 3 the only information presented about the target individual was his social rank and shared group membership with the transgressor. Thus, this minimal information...
alone is sufficient to induce the trickle-down of moral suspicion.

**Study 4**

In Study 4, we examined what consequences might result from the moral spillover effects observed in our previous studies, focusing on how this spillover could yield reputational costs for other members and affect their job prospects at another organization. We predicted that a higher ranking transgressor would lead another group member to receive more negative job-hiring recommendations.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants $(n = 118; 46$ women; mean age $= 30.92, SD = 9.85)$ were recruited and compensated through Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk.

**Procedure**

Participants first completed the attention check used in Studies 1 and 2. They then read an alleged news article (see Supplementary Online Materials) describing an organizational employee, “Brett,” who was charged with fraud. Participants were randomly assigned to read that this employee was a “higher ranking executive” or “entry-level employee” at a global trading services provider. This employee was accused of leading clients to pay higher amounts than disclosed for the execution of trading orders and then pocketing the extra revenue (a self-serving transgression). As an additional attention check, participants were asked to briefly summarize this article.

Participants were informed that their next task involved evaluating a job candidate, “Luke Myers,” for a mid-level position at an organization. Luke was allegedly employed at the same organization described in the prior article. Participants were to provide a hiring recommendation letter for Luke based on a reference letter. This letter was designed to be relatively positive but also mentioned the ethical violation that Brett had been accused of. Specifically, the letter noted that there had been a recent ethical scandal involving another member of Luke’s organization, but the letter writer (who himself was not a member of this same organization) stated he had no further knowledge of this issue and would leave it to readers to make their own determination on the matter. Moreover, paralleling the design of Study 2 in which participants were asked to make judgments about individuals involved in ambiguous ethical situations, Luke’s reference letter mentioned a potential ethical violation that he may have engaged in.\(^4\) According to the letter, a client had filed a complaint against Luke for deceptive investment advice, but this matter was settled as a misunderstanding. Participants made their job-hiring recommendations using 2 items, “I recommend that Luke Myers not be hired for the position” and “I am wary of hiring Luke Myers for this position” (1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree; $r = 0.20, p = 0.030$). No other dependent measures were included.

**Results**

Participants were excluded from analyses if they failed the initial attention check $(n = 17)$ or did not accurately describe the article in which Brett Riley was charged with fraud $(n = 8)^5$

**Job-Hiring Recommendation**

A higher ranking employee’s fraudulent behaviors led participants to report more opposition to hiring another employee of this organization ($M = 4.58, SD = 1.17$) than a lower ranking employee’s fraudulent behaviors ($M = 4.03, SD = 1.35$), $t(91) = 2.09, p = 0.039$, $d = 0.44$.

**Discussion**

Study 4 extends our previous results by employing a different paradigm and a more consequential outcome, demonstrating that moral spillover can impact important decisions such as job-hiring recommendations. Exposure to a higher ranking transgressor made people more reluctant to hire another member from this organization for a new job. These findings resonate with the experiences of individuals formerly employed at corrupt companies (Associated Press, 2011), who may find it difficult to escape the associated stigma and be denied future job opportunities.

**General Discussion**

Four studies provided consistent evidence that a moral transgressor’s organizational/hierarchical rank magnifies moral spillover. A higher ranking group member’s unethical behavior was perceived as more prototypical of the group, leading to more negative moral impressions of the group (Study 1). This negative moral impression of the group resulted in greater moral suspicion toward other group members, and this effect occurred even when the moral transgressor’s behavior was driven by self-serving motives that benefited the transgressor at the expense of the group (Study 2). These effects generalized to multiple types of ethical transgressions, spanning violations in scientific research, medical practice, and finance (Study 3). Finally, we found that these moral spillover effects could have substantial consequences, specifically by affecting job-hiring decisions (Study 4). Thus, across various types of moral transgressions corresponding to real-life ethical scandals (Associated Press, 2011; Callaway, 2011; Pear, 2012), we found that a higher ranking group member’s ethical violations result in greater moral spillover, affecting not only other group members’ moral reputations but their career prospects as well.

Our findings suggest that the perceived prototypicality of higher ranking transgressors is what leads to greater moral spillover. One alternative interpretation is that people infer that higher ranking transgressor exert direct influence over other group members, pressuring them to also act unethically. While
transgressions of a higher ranking individual may, in reality, be more diagnostic of the group’s overall moral character. However, it is important to note that this is not always true; there are cases in which higher ranking individuals are solely responsible for their transgressions and other group members are innocent of wrongdoing. Thus, we would not commit strongly to characterizing the trickle-down of moral suspicion as either a rational inference or an irrational bias.

Although the present research investigated only how an individual’s moral behaviors affect impressions of associated others, we do not believe that such spillover effects are necessarily limited to the domain of morality. Indeed, various nonmoral stigmas can transfer from individuals to associated others (Pryor, Reeder, & Monroe, 2012), and social rank may affect spillover effects for these stigmas as well. For instance, a higher ranking group member’s incompetent behavior may lead to greater suspicion regarding other group members’ competence than if such bumbling were exhibited by a lower ranking member. Future research may benefit from examining these possibilities.

Our findings also highlight the potential vulnerabilities faced by group members in lower ranking positions. Although the present research did not manipulate the social rank of the target of moral spillover, we speculate that—if moral stigma is particularly likely to spread down a hierarchy—lower ranking group members may be more likely to be tainted by the actions of their superiors than vice versa. Indeed, it would be interesting to examine whether higher ranking group members may receive a buffer against being tainted by others’ transgressions. However, the present research also suggests strategies that individuals could use to alleviate the greater moral stigma resulting from higher ranking transgressors. Specifically, because moral spillover is affected by a group member’s perceived prototypicality, people could attempt to reduce the perceived prototypicality of unethical group members (by suggesting that they are not representative or normative of the group as a whole) in order to reduce moral spillover.

The present research validates the concerns expressed by those who have been perhaps unduly tainted by high-profile scandals (Associated Press, 2011). Moral suspicion trickles down social hierarchies, making higher ranking moral transgressors particularly damaging for the reputations of their colleagues, associates, and subordinates.

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Notes
1. All results remained significant when these four participants were not excluded.
2. When these 22 participants were not excluded, the main effect of motive on moral suspicion became marginally significant. All other effects remained significant.
3. When these 21 participants were not excluded, the main effect of rank on moral suspicion was still marginally significant. The main effect of motive on moral suspicion became marginally significant. All other effects remained significant.
4. Although the results of Study 3 suggested that such ambiguous information is not necessary for moral spillover to occur, we included this in the design of Study 4 because it was run chronologically prior to Study 3.
5. When these 25 participants were not excluded, the effect of the moral transgressor’s rank on job-hiring recommendations was still marginally significant, $t(116) = 1.90, p = .060.$

Supplemental Material

The online data supplements are available at http://spp.sagepub.com/supplemental.

References


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