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Selective Moral Leniency Toward Culturally Embedded Animal Exploitation: The Role of Identity and Ideology

Social Psychological and
Personality Science
1–12

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Abstract

Moral concern for animals is widely endorsed, yet people appear to make exceptions for practices of animal exploitation rooted in their own cultural traditions. In two studies (total $N = 1,318$), we tested whether support for culturally embedded practices of animal exploitation varies with cultural ingroup-outgroup origin as well as with ideological and identity-based factors. Across the United States (Study 1), Norway, Spain, and Australia (Study 2), participants consistently supported their own country's (ingroup) practice more than the foreign (outgroup) practices; for example, Norwegian participants supported whaling more than kangaroo hunting or bullfighting, suggesting culturally selective moral leniency. Furthermore, right-wing authoritarianism and national identification showed specific associations with support for ingroup practices, whereas social dominance orientation was associated with broader support for animal exploitation (including higher speciesism). These findings offer insight into why contested animal practices persist, revealing that evaluations of animal exploitation vary systematically with cultural group membership and ideological orientations.

Keywords

morality, ideology, national identification, human–animal relations, speciesism

Handling Editor: Shenel Husnu

Human relations with other animals are marked by a striking moral paradox. People widely endorse principles of compassion and the avoidance of harm toward animals. Yet they frequently support, and sometimes proudly defend, practices that violate these principles, particularly when such practices are enjoyable or embedded in culturally cherished traditions (Bastian & Loughnan, 2017; Loughnan et al., 2014). Animal consumption, animal-based entertainment, and hunting are among the most prominent examples of this tension (Bastian & Loughnan, 2017; Dhont & Hodson, 2020, 2026).

Despite a recent surge in research on ideological motives and moral disengagement in the context of animal exploitation and consumption (e.g., Caviola et al., 2019; Dhont et al., 2019; Ioannidou et al., 2026; Leite et al., 2019; McGuire et al., 2023; Rothgerber & Rosenfeld, 2021), surprisingly little is known about how people evaluate practices of animal use in their own culture compared with those of other cultures. Attitudes toward animal exploitation likely reflect not only cultural preferences but also genuine moral evaluations, as people often recognize these practices as harmful while still regarding them as acceptable within particular cultural contexts (Carter et al., 2025). However, it remains unclear whether people extend moral leniency toward animal exploitation uniformly across practices from

one's own and other cultures, or selectively, favoring culturally valued ingroup practices over those of outgroups. Equally underexplored are the ideological and identity-based correlates of such selective judgments. The present research addresses these gaps by testing whether support for morally questionable practices involving animals varies depending on whether the practice is an ingroup or outgroup cultural practice, and by identifying the ideological and identity-based factors associated with these evaluations.

Identity-Based Correlates of Judgments About Animal Exploitation

People often resolve tensions between their moral values and their treatment of animals through motivated forms of

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reasoning (Bastian & Loughnan, 2017; Dhont & Hodson, 2026; Piazza, 2020; Plous, 2003; Rothgerber & Rosenfeld, 2021). When individuals benefit from using and harming animals in particular ways (e.g., consumption or experimentation), they may adjust their perceptions of animals or rationalize the acceptability of these practices (Bratanova et al., 2011; Ioannidou et al., 2023; Ioannidou, Lesk, et al., 2024; Vezirian et al., 2024). For example, people tend to attribute less mental capacity to animals used for food, thereby reducing the moral weight of harming those animals (Bastian et al., 2012; Ioannidou, Francis, et al., 2024; Krings et al., 2021).

More broadly, people commonly justify animal exploitation and consumption by appealing to normality, naturalness, necessity, or niceness—the so-called “4Ns” (Piazza et al., 2015), a set of justifications that emerge across diverse contexts of animal use, including entertainment, medical testing, and culling (Piazza et al., 2020; Plous, 2003). These findings suggest that support for animal exploitation is closely linked to motivated reasoning that helps preserve existing behaviors and cultural practices (Leach et al., 2022; Piazza et al., 2020). Importantly, such motivated processes may be especially pronounced when the practices in question are tied to one’s own cultural group. For example, even within Western cultures, practices such as eating horse meat are normalized in some countries but morally rejected in others, illustrating how moral evaluations of animal exploitation are often highly specific to people’s own cultural context rather than universally applied. This raises the question of which psychological factors are associated with these culturally selective moral judgments.

Research shows that children attribute greater moral concern to animals than adults do (McGuire et al., 2023; Wilks et al., 2021), indicating that moral concern appears to decline as cultural norms of animal use become internalized across development (McGuire et al., 2026). Consistent with this account, children as young as 4–7 years old already evaluate the consumption of animals as more morally acceptable when it is framed as culturally important, explicitly invoking tradition to justify their evaluations (Carter et al., 2025). This suggests that cultural values may begin to shape moral concern for animals early in development. However, rather than eliminating moral concern altogether, this developmental process may contribute to its selective application. As children come to identify with their cultural group and its practices, moral concern for animals might be applied more selectively, such that practices tied to one’s own cultural group are evaluated with greater leniency than similar practices associated with other groups.

From a social identity perspective, individuals are motivated to uphold ingroup norms and maintain a positive social identity (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and defending culturally embedded practices of animal exploitation may serve precisely this function. Those

who identify more strongly with their ingroup are especially motivated to achieve positive ingroup distinctiveness (Hinkle & Brown, 1990; Jetten et al., 2004), which may translate into greater support for ingroup, but not outgroup, practices of animal exploitation: when such practices are seen as markers of cultural identity, defending them reaffirms collective norms and traditions (e.g., María et al., 2017).

Such a pattern would suggest a form of *selective moral leniency* that goes beyond generic ingroup favoritism. Unlike preferences for culturally valued practices such as music or sport, judgments of animal exploitation involve practices that people often recognize as causing harm to sentient beings. Support for ingroup practices of animal exploitation may therefore reflect not merely preference for one’s own culture but a more selective application of moral concern when culturally valued forms of animal harm are implicated. In this way, defending ingroup practices of animal exploitation may help sustain the moral image of one’s ingroup, much like individuals protect their personal moral self-image (Bastian & Loughnan, 2017; Rothgerber & Rosenfeld, 2021), potentially helping people maintain a sense of collective moral integrity while cultural values are prioritized over animal lives.

Ideological Correlates of Judgments About Animal Exploitation

Moral evaluations of animals also reflect deeper ideological commitments and belief systems. One of the most consistent ideological correlates of support for animal exploitation is social dominance orientation (SDO), the preference for group-based dominance and inequality (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Although originally developed to explain attitudes and discrimination in human intergroup relations, SDO is also associated with environmental attitudes and attitudes toward animals (Dhont et al., 2020; Milfont et al., 2013, 2018). Individuals higher in SDO more strongly endorse speciesism, the belief system that underpins the differential moral treatment of animals based on their species and human-defined roles (Caviola et al., 2019; Dhont et al., 2016; Dhont & Hodson, 2026; Singer, 1975). Likewise, those higher in SDO express greater support for animal exploitation and hold stronger beliefs in human superiority over other animals (Bègue & Vezirian, 2022; Caviola et al., 2019; Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Ioannidou et al., 2026). Despite SDO’s broad associations with support for animal exploitation, little is known about how ideological beliefs operate when the practices in question carry culturally specific meaning, such as bullfighting in Spain. Because animal exploitation inherently involves hierarchy and domination, individuals higher in SDO likely support such practices, to some degree, regardless of cultural origin.

However, support for culturally specific practices may also be associated with ideological factors tied to traditional values and adherence to shared norms, which go beyond generalized dominance beliefs. Whereas SDO reflects a broad preference for hierarchy, right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) reflects motivations for social conformity, preservation of tradition, and submission to established authority (Altemeyer, 1981, 1996; Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). Notably, however, whereas SDO is a robust correlate of human–animal relations, RWA tends to show weaker or inconsistent associations with speciesism and general human supremacy beliefs (Caviola et al., 2019; Dhont et al., 2016; Ioannidou et al., 2026). By contrast, RWA may be particularly relevant when the practice in question is an important cultural tradition or common ingroup practice. After all, individuals higher in RWA are particularly motivated to defend and preserve established customs and ingroup norms (Duckitt, 2006; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Ioannidou et al., 2026). Thus, although RWA may only weakly (or not at all) be uniquely associated with generalized support for animal exploitation, we expect that RWA will show stronger associations with support for ingroup cultural practices of animal exploitation, particularly those that symbolize tradition or widely accepted norms.

The Present Investigation

Past research shows that people frequently rationalize animal exploitation and that group-dominance motives are associated with general acceptance of animal exploitation. However, far less is known about the psychological factors associated with support for culturally specific practices tied to national identity or tradition, leaving two central questions unaddressed. First, do people evaluate practices of animal exploitation more favorably when they originate within their cultural ingroup than when they occur elsewhere, consistent with culturally selective forms of moral judgment? Second, are ideological and identity-based factors differentially associated with support for ingroup versus outgroup cultural practices?

The present research addresses these questions in two studies. Study 1 provides a preliminary test of culturally selective support for animal exploitation within a U.S. sample, focusing on the ingroup cultural practice of rodeos and the outgroup cultural practices of whaling and bullfighting. Study 2 provides a confirmatory test by extending this approach cross-nationally and examining support for animal exploitation in heterogeneous, stratified samples from Norway, Spain, and Australia, in which whaling, bullfighting, and kangaroo hunting, respectively, represent culturally valued or nationally distinctive ingroup practices. This design allows each national sample to evaluate both its own ingroup practice and the same set of outgroup practices, providing a comprehensive test of whether support for

animal exploitation varies systematically with cultural ingroup membership, ideological factors, and national identification. We test three hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Participants will support their ingroup cultural practice more than outgroup practices.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): RWA and national identification will show specific associations with support for ingroup practices.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): SDO will be consistently associated with support for all practices, regardless of cultural origin.

Both studies received ethical approval, and the materials, datafiles, and online supplement are available at <https://osf.io/mk3sj/>.

Study 1

Methods

Participants and Procedure. Respondents were 242 U.S. adults, recruited via MTurk in July 2016 (138 women, 102 men, 2 identifying as another gender), with a mean age of 38.33 years ($SD = 12.20$; range 20–72; Supplemental Table S1 for details). Participants completed an online survey that included measures of national identification, ideological and intergroup attitudes, speciesism, attitudes toward cultural practices of animal use, and demographics.

We aimed to recruit 250 participants to ensure adequate power to detect small effects. Of the 261 participants who began the survey, 252 submitted complete responses. The survey included an initial nationality screening, terminating automatically for non-U.S. respondents. Participants who reported a country of origin other than the U.S. were additionally excluded ($n = 10$), resulting in a final sample of 242. Qualtrics quality checks confirmed no duplicate respondents and no participants flagged for unusually fast responding. Sensitivity analyses with G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) indicated that this sample size provided 80% power ($\alpha = .05$) to detect small effects ($f \geq .085$ for the within-subjects ANOVA and $f^2 \geq .033$ for the regression analyses).

Measures. Unless otherwise indicated, respondents completed all measures on 7-point scales (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*). Item scores were averaged, with higher values reflecting higher levels of each construct. All scales demonstrated good internal reliability (Table 1; see Online Supplement for full item lists).

SDO was assessed using the 8-item SDO₇ scale (Ho et al., 2015; e.g., “An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others to be on the bottom”). RWA was measured with 12 items from Duckitt et al.’s (2010) scale (e.g., “The ‘old-fashioned ways’ and ‘old-fashioned values’

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Zero-Order Correlations Between Variables (Study 1, Conducted in the United States, $N = 242$).

Variable	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. SDO	2.72 (1.36)	.90	.34***	.33***	.27***	.20**	.27***	.24***
2. RWA	3.74 (1.29)	.90		.47***	.12	.37***	.16*	-.01
3. National Identification	5.36 (1.57)	.97			.14*	.32***	.13*	.03
4. Speciesism	3.66 (1.29)	.85				.47***	.45***	.48***
5. Pro-Rodeo (ingroup practice)	3.69 (1.53)	.92					.53***	.29***
6. Pro-Bullfighting (outgroup practice)	2.38 (1.26)	.90						.53***
7. Pro-Whaling (outgroup practice)	2.09 (1.14)	.87						

Note. SDO = social dominance orientation; RWA = right-wing authoritarianism.

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

still show the best way to live”). National identification was measured with five items adapted from Abrams et al. (1998; e.g., “I am glad to be American”). Speciesism was measured with eight items (Dhont et al., 2016; Herzog et al., 1991), assessing acceptance of various practices of animal exploitation (e.g., factory farming, animal testing, the fur industry; reverse-coded example: “Much of scientific research done with animals is unnecessary and cruel”).

To measure support for cultural practices of animal exploitation, we focused on rodeos (ingroup practice), and whaling and bullfighting (outgroup practices). For each practice, participants completed eight items assessing general attitudes and justifying beliefs (Piazza et al., 2015, 2020). They indicated “how [they] generally feel about rodeos/whaling/bullfighting” (1 = *Negative*; 7 = *Positive*), whether they believed the practice is “unpleasant or pleasant” (1 = *Unpleasant*; 7 = *Pleasant*), and whether the practice is “amusing,” “offensive” (reverse-coded), “a natural activity,” “a necessary activity for the local economy where it happens,” “an activity that is normal and expected in society,” and “disgusting” (reverse-coded) (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*). Items were averaged into a composite score, with higher scores indicating greater support.

Results

First, we conducted a within-subjects ANOVA to investigate differences in support for the three cultural practices of animal exploitation. There were significant differences in support for the practices, $F(2, 482) = 179.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .43$. Consistent with H1, U.S. respondents expressed stronger support for their ingroup practice (rodeos) than for the outgroup practices of whaling, $t(241) = 15.35$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.21$, and bullfighting, $t(241) = 14.89$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.00$ (Table 1).

Next, we examined the associations of SDO, RWA, and national identification with support for animal exploitation practices. We conducted an ANCOVA with practice type as the within-subjects factor and SDO, RWA, and national identification as covariates, testing their interactions with

Table 2. ANCOVA Results for Support for Cultural Practices of Animal Exploitation by Practice Type, Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), and National Identification (Study 1, Conducted in the United States, $N = 242$).

Variable	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2
Practice type	0.92	.400	.004
SDO	11.43	< .001	.046
RWA	3.39	.067	.014
Identification	1.34	.248	.006
Practice type $\times$ SDO	4.09	.017	.017
Practice type $\times$ RWA	13.86	< .001	.055
Practice type $\times$ Identification	4.69	.010	.019

practice type. The analyses revealed that across practices, SDO was significantly associated with support for the practices, whereas RWA and national identification were not (Table 2). More importantly, significant interactions emerged between practice type and each individual difference variable, indicating that the associations of SDO, RWA, and national identification varied by practice type.

Following up on these interactions, we conducted regression analyses testing the associations of SDO, RWA, and national identification with support for each practice (Table 3). These analyses confirmed that both RWA and national identification were associated with greater support for the ingroup practice (rodeos), consistent with H2. In contrast, SDO was associated with greater support for the outgroup practices (whaling and bullfighting) but not the ingroup practice (rodeos), partially supporting H3. We also tested the associations between the individual difference variables and speciesism. SDO was significantly associated with speciesism, whereas RWA and national identification were not (Table 3).¹

Taken together, the results of Study 1 support the prediction that people express greater support for their ingroup practice than for outgroup practices of animal exploitation. Furthermore, RWA and national identification showed selective associations with support for the ingroup practice, whereas SDO was associated with

Table 3. Regression Results Showing Differential Associations of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), and National Identification With Support for Ingroup and Outgroup Practices and Speciesism (Study 1, Conducted in the United States, $N = 242$).

Variable	Pro-Rodeo (ingroup practice)			Pro-Whaling (outgroup practice)			Pro-Bullfighting (outgroup practice)			Speciesism		
	β	B (SE)	p	β	B (SE)	p	β	B (SE)	p	β	B (SE)	p
SDO	.05	.06 (0.07)	.417	.27	.23 (0.06)	<.001	.25	.23 (0.06)	<.001	.23	.22 (0.06)	<.001
RWA	.27	.32 (0.08)	<.001	-.09	-.08 (0.06)	.227	.07	.07 (0.07)	.319	.01	.01 (0.07)	.851
National Identification	.17	.17 (0.07)	.014	-.02	-.01 (0.05)	.830	.01	.01 (0.06)	.878	.05	.04 (0.06)	.482

support for the outgroup practices and speciesism more generally. However, because Study 1 was conducted within a single national context and involved one ingroup practice contrasted with two foreign practices, it could not fully disentangle whether these patterns reflect culturally selective evaluations per se, or the features specific to the chosen practices, or the U.S. context. Notably, the practices may not be equivalent in terms of the nature and severity of harm involved, which limits the interpretability of any differences in support between practices. Study 2 was therefore designed to provide a more comprehensive test by examining support for ingroup versus outgroup practices of animal exploitation within multiple national contexts.

Study 2

Study 2 sought to replicate the culturally selective pattern observed in Study 1 and to provide a more stringent test of its generalizability across national contexts. The hypotheses tested in Study 2 were specified prior to data collection. We gathered heterogeneous samples from Norway, Spain, and Australia, countries broadly comparable on socioeconomic indicators (e.g., Human Development Index) yet differing in their cultural traditions involving animals. Participants in all three countries evaluated whaling, bullfighting, and kangaroo hunting, which serve as the cultural ingroup practices of Norway, Spain, and Australia, respectively. This design allowed us to compare ingroup versus outgroup practices within each country while holding constant the set of practices being evaluated, and to assess whether SDO, RWA, and national identification show generalized or culturally specific associations with support for these practices.

Method

Participants and Procedure. Data collection was administered by a survey company (Qualtrics), which recruited 1,076 respondents in Norway ($n = 356$), Spain ($n = 360$), and Australia ($n = 360$) from their online panels in November 2018. Samples were stratified by gender (548 women, 528 men) and age ($M = 45.72$, $SD = 16.33$, range: 18–83 years) to approximately represent the populations of each country (Supplemental Table S2 for details). We aimed to recruit

350 participants from each country to ensure adequate power to detect small effects and to achieve balanced representation across gender and age groups. Sensitivity analyses using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) indicated that this sample size provided 80% power ($\alpha = .05$) to detect small effects ($f \geq .044$ for the ANOVA; $f^2 \geq .022$ for the regression analyses). Data quality was ensured through Qualtrics' managed panel service, which included attention filters, survey timing checks, and an initial nationality confirmation. Participants completed an online survey² that included the measures described below (see Online Supplement for full item lists).

Measures. Similar to Study 1, respondents completed measures of SDO (8 items), RWA (9 items), and national identification (5 items) on 7-point scales (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*). Speciesism was assessed using the 6-item speciesism scale developed by Caviola et al. (2019). An example item is: "Humans have the right to use animals however they want to" (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*).

To measure support for cultural practices of animal exploitation, we focused on whaling, bullfighting, and kangaroo hunting. For each practice, participants completed six items adapted from Study 1, indicating whether they find the practice amusing, necessary, natural, and normal; how much they generally support or oppose the practice (1 = *Completely oppose*; 7 = *Completely support*); and the extent to which they consider the practice morally acceptable (1 = *Totally unacceptable*; 7 = *Totally acceptable*). For each practice, items were averaged into a composite score, with higher scores indicating greater support (Table 4 for descriptive statistics and reliabilities).

Results

To test for differences in support for the three cultural practices, we conducted a 3×3 mixed ANOVA with country as a between-subjects variable and practice type as a within-subjects variable. There were significant differences in support for the practices, $F(2, 2,146) = 33.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .030$, and between countries, $F(2, 1,073) = 11.59$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .021$. These differences were qualified by a significant practice type $\times$ country interaction,

Table 4. Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Zero-Order Correlations Between Variables (Study 2).

Variable	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α	2	3	4	5	6	7
Norway (<i>n</i> = 356)								
1. SDO	3.04 (1.15)	.79	.26***	.06	.34***	.37**	.21***	.15**
2. RWA	3.99 (0.83)	.59		.25***	.13*	.08	.20***	-.003
3. National Identification	5.73 (1.32)	.91			.06	.02	.21***	.01
4. Speciesism	2.77 (1.34)	.80				.57***	.55***	.54***
5. Pro-Bullfighting (outgroup practice)	2.29 (1.42)	.91					.42***	.54***
6. Pro-Whaling (ingroup practice)	3.24 (1.67)	.92						.61***
7. Pro-Kangaroo Hunting (outgroup practice)	2.86 (1.57)	.93						
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α	2	3	4	5	6	7
Spain (<i>n</i> = 360)								
1. SDO	3.46 (1.11)	.79	.31***	.10	.36***	.22**	.26***	.34***
2. RWA	3.98 (1.16)	.80		.51***	.29***	.50***	.20***	.29***
3. National Identification	5.27 (1.88)	.98			.28***	.49***	.25***	.30***
4. Speciesism	2.82 (1.19)	.71				.58***	.61***	.63***
5. Pro-Bullfighting (ingroup practice)	2.91 (1.89)	.96					.53***	.65***
6. Pro-Whaling (outgroup practice)	1.96 (1.20)	.91						.74***
7. Pro-Kangaroo Hunting (outgroup practice)	2.25 (1.39)	.94						
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α	2	3	4	5	6	7
Australia (<i>n</i> = 360)								
1. SDO	2.90 (1.13)	.81	.21***	.03	.36***	.24**	.18***	.17**
2. RWA	4.51 (1.17)	.84		.27***	.04	.08	.002	.05
3. National Identification	6.00 (1.23)	.94			.04	-.02	-.01	.01
4. Speciesism	2.64 (1.18)	.76				.49***	.60***	.48***
5. Pro-Bullfighting (outgroup practice)	2.41 (1.31)	.89					.56***	.44***
6. Pro-Whaling (outgroup practice)	1.92 (1.19)	.89						.50***
7. Pro-Kangaroo Hunting (ingroup practice)	3.07 (1.59)	.92						

Note. SDO = social dominance orientation; RWA = right-wing authoritarianism.

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

$F(4, 2,146) = 122.99, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .186$. Corroborating H1, respondents from all three countries expressed stronger support for their ingroup practice than for the outgroup practices (Table 4; Figure 1).

Specifically, Norwegian respondents expressed stronger support for whaling (ingroup) than for bullfighting and kangaroo hunting (outgroup), $t(1,073) = 12.47, p < .001, d = 0.63$ and $t(1,073) = 5.01, p < .001, d = 0.26$, respectively. Spanish respondents expressed stronger support for bullfighting (ingroup) than for whaling and kangaroo hunting (outgroup), $t(1,073) = 12.63, p < .001, d = 0.64$ and $t(1,073) = 8.73, p < .001, d = 0.44$, respectively. Australian respondents expressed stronger support for kangaroo hunting (ingroup) than for whaling and bullfighting (outgroup), $t(1,073) = 15.25, p < .001, d = 0.77$ and $t(1,073) = 8.79, p < .001, d = 0.45$, respectively.

Next, we tested the associations of the individual difference variables with support for cultural practices of animal exploitation within each country. For each country sample, we conducted an ANCOVA with practice type as a within-subjects factor and SDO, RWA, and national identification as covariates, testing their interactions with practice type. SDO was significantly associated with support for the practices in all three samples, while RWA and national identification were significant only in the Spanish sample (Table 5). More importantly, significant interactions between practice type and the individual difference variables emerged in the Norwegian and Spanish samples, but not in Australia.

To unpack these interactions, we conducted regression analyses testing the associations of SDO, RWA, and national identification with support for each practice within each country (Table 6). In line with H2, both RWA

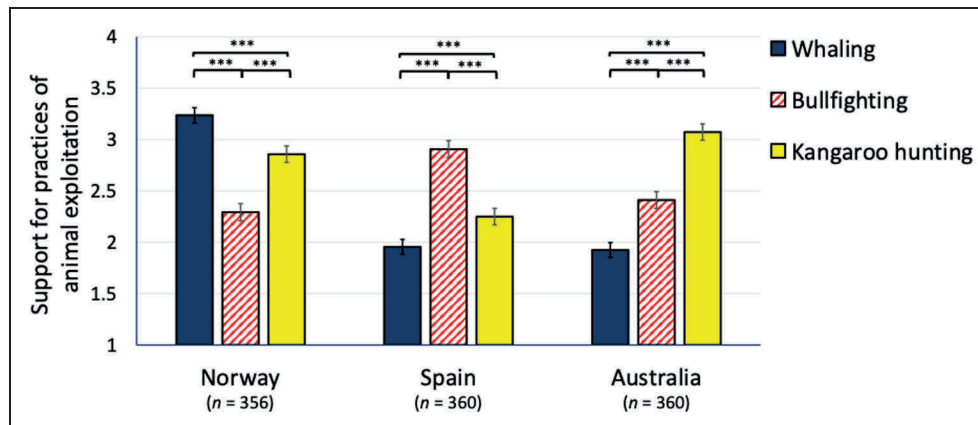


Figure 1. Mean levels of support for three practices of animal exploitation (whaling, bullfighting, and kangaroo hunting) in Norway, Spain, and Australia (Study 2).

*** $p < .001$.

Table 5. ANCOVA Results for Support for Cultural Practices of Animal Exploitation by Practice Type, Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), and National Identification in Three Different Countries (Study 2).

Variable	Norway (n = 356)			Spain (n = 360)			Australia (n = 360)		
	F	p	η_p^2	F	p	η_p^2	F	p	η_p^2
Practice type	9.80	<.001	.027	23.89	<.001	.063	1.85	.159	.005
SDO	28.08	<.001	.074	21.94	<.001	.058	20.16	<.001	.054
RWA	0.13	.719	.000	11.05	<.001	.030	0.02	.887	.000
Identification	2.29	.131	.006	33.94	<.001	.087	0.06	.807	.000
Practice $\times$ SDO	7.41	<.001	.021	5.11	.006	.014	0.60	.550	.002
Practice $\times$ RWA	5.36	.005	.015	28.12	<.001	.073	0.72	.487	.002
Practice $\times$ Identification	7.27	<.001	.020	12.81	<.001	.035	0.19	.826	.001

Table 6. Regression Results Showing Differential Associations of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), and National Identification With Support for Ingroup and Outgroup Practices and Speciesism (Study 2).

Variable	Pro-Whaling			Pro-Bullfighting			Pro-Kangaroo Hunting			Speciesism		
	β	B (SE)	p	β	B (SE)	p	β	B (SE)	p	β	B (SE)	p
Norway (n = 356)												
SDO	.17	.25 (0.08)	.002	.38	.47 (0.06)	<.001	.16	.22 (0.08)	.003	.33	.38 (0.06)	<.001
RWA	.11	.22 (0.11)	.046	-.02	-.04 (0.09)	.687	-.05	-.09 (0.11)	.392	.04	.06 (0.09)	.494
Identification	.17	.22 (0.07)	.002	.003	.003 (0.06)	.951	.01	.02 (0.07)	.799	.03	.05 (0.03)	.562
Spain (n = 360)												
SDO	.24	.26 (0.06)	<.001	.10	.17 (0.08)	.034	.29	.36 (0.06)	<.001	.31	.34 (0.05)	<.001
RWA	.02	.02 (0.06)	.802	.31	.50 (0.09)	<.001	.09	.10 (0.07)	.137	.10	.10 (0.06)	.084
Identification	.22	.14 (0.04)	<.001	.33	.33 (0.05)	<.001	.23	.17 (0.04)	<.001	.19	.12 (0.04)	<.001
Australia (n = 360)												
SDO	.19	.20 (0.06)	<.001	.23	.27 (0.06)	<.001	.16	.23 (0.08)	.002	.33	.35 (0.05)	<.001
RWA	-.04	-.04 (0.06)	.522	.04	.04 (0.06)	.481	.01	.02 (0.08)	.837	-.04	-.04 (0.05)	.481
Identification	-.01	-.01 (0.05)	.929	-.03	-.03 (0.06)	.553	.002	.003 (0.07)	.967	.05	.04 (0.05)	.391

and national identification were associated with greater support for participants' ingroup practice in Norway (whaling) and Spain (bullfighting). However, neither RWA

nor national identification was associated with support for kangaroo hunting in Australia, providing no evidence for H2 in Australia.

Consistent with H3, SDO was associated with greater support for all three cultural practices across all three countries, as well as higher speciesism (Table 6). Unexpectedly, national identification was also associated with support for outgroup practices (whaling and kangaroo hunting) in Spain.³

General Discussion

People widely oppose harming animals, yet the present findings demonstrate that such opposition is not applied uniformly but is relaxed for culturally embedded practices of animal exploitation tied to one's own cultural group. Across samples from the United States (Study 1), Spain, Norway, and Australia (Study 2), people showed selective moral leniency toward their own cultural practices of animal exploitation compared with practices performed elsewhere. In Study 2, this culture-specific bias became especially clear: Spanish participants expressed greater support for bullfighting than for whaling or kangaroo hunting; Norwegian participants supported whaling more strongly than bullfighting or kangaroo hunting; and Australian participants expressed greater support for kangaroo hunting than for either of the foreign practices. This ingroup-favoring moral flexibility is consistent with research showing that people judge transgressions more leniently when they are committed by ingroup rather than outgroup members (Robertson et al., 2024; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007). Crucially, however, the present findings suggest that this selective leniency extends to judgments about harm to animal victims themselves. Specifically, whether harm toward animals is condemned as a moral violation appears to vary not only with the nature of the harm, but also with which cultural group practices it.

The ideological and identity-based correlates offer further insights into the possible motivational nature of this selective moral leniency. Both RWA and national identification were associated with greater support for participants' ingroup practice in three of the four samples—specifically with higher support for rodeos in the United States, for whaling in Norway, and for bullfighting in Spain. These patterns are consistent with the idea that individuals higher in RWA and national identification tend to support and defend cultural traditions, either because such practices reflect valued ingroup norms and social cohesion (Altemeyer, 1996; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Haase et al., 2020; Osborne et al., 2023), or because they symbolize the collective identity of the group (Ellemers et al., 2002; María et al., 2017). In this way, the associations with RWA and national identification point to an identity-protective interpretation of selective moral leniency, tied to broader commitments to ingroup norms and identity.

However, significant interactions between practice type and the ideological and identity-based variables did not emerge in the Australian sample, as neither RWA nor

national identification was significantly associated with support for kangaroo hunting in Australia. One plausible interpretation is that kangaroo hunting in Australia may not be generally considered a meaningful national tradition but rather primarily framed in terms of wildlife management or pest control (Berlin, 2019; Descovich et al., 2015; Hampton & Forsyth, 2016). As a result, this practice may not be perceived as a salient tradition or symbol of national identity in the way whaling is in Norway or bullfighting is in Spain. In addition, national identification was associated with support for outgroup practices in the Spanish sample, suggesting that identity-based support for animal exploitation may sometimes extend beyond strictly ingroup practices when other forms of animal exploitation are perceived as culturally analogous or legitimate. Overall, these findings suggest that RWA and national identification may be especially relevant when practices of animal exploitation carry clear symbolic meaning for the cultural ingroup.

In contrast to the specific patterns observed for RWA and national identification, SDO showed consistent and generalized associations with support for animal exploitation across both studies. Individuals higher in SDO expressed greater endorsement of outgroup animal exploitation practices, as well as higher levels of speciesism. These findings align with extensive evidence that SDO reflects a broad preference for hierarchy and dominance that generalizes beyond human intergroup relations to the human–animal domain (Caviola et al., 2019; Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Dhont et al., 2016; Graça et al., 2018; Ioannidou et al., 2026). From this perspective, support for animal exploitation may reflect one expression of a more fundamental orientation favoring group-based dominance and inequality (Dhont et al., 2016; Kteily et al., 2012; Milfont et al., 2013; Sibley & Liu, 2010; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Our results extend prior work by showing that SDO remains a robust correlate even when people evaluate culturally specific practices whose symbolic meaning varies across societies, providing further evidence that SDO is associated with attitudes toward animal exploitation broadly and largely independent of the cultural meaning attached to these practices. More critically, our findings indicate that SDO is not the only ideological factor associated with support for animal exploitation. Selective moral leniency toward culturally embedded practices appears to reflect not only generalized dominance motives but also tradition-oriented and identity-based motives.

Limitations and Future Directions

Some limitations warrant mention. First, all data were cross-sectional, which prevents causal inferences. Future research could manipulate how practices are framed (e.g., as long-standing national traditions versus wildlife-management measures), describe a novel or unfamiliar practice as belonging to the ingroup versus an outgroup, or temporarily heighten national identity salience (Goldring

& Heiphetz, 2020; Leidner & Castano, 2012; Robertson et al., 2024). Such designs would provide direct tests of whether cultural framing, perceived tradition, or identity salience causally shifts support for harmful practices. In contrast, the present findings reflect relatively spontaneous moral evaluations of animal exploitation that draw on participants' existing cultural norms and identities.

Second, although we framed selective moral leniency in terms of identity-protective and ideologically motivated reasoning, the mechanisms underlying this pattern were not directly tested, and alternative explanations cannot be ruled out. For instance, people may be more knowledgeable about their own cultural practices and thus more aware of contextual factors that mitigate perceived harm, rather than more motivated to rationalize it. Similarly, harm-rationalization processes, such as reduced attribution of mental capacity to animals (e.g., Bastian et al., 2012; Ioannidou, Francis, et al., 2024), were not measured, and their role remains to be established in experimental designs.

Third, our studies focused on a limited set of cultural practices of animal exploitation. These practices differ not only in cultural meaning but also in their perceived function and historical controversy. Moreover, all practices and samples were drawn from Western countries, raising the possibility that the observed patterns reflect cultural dynamics specific to Western moral norms about animals (Bryant et al., 2024; Hopwood et al., 2025). Although the cross-national design in Study 2 allowed us to hold the set of practices constant across countries, the generalizability of the observed patterns remains uncertain. In addition, although the pattern of correlations between RWA and other measures was similar in both direction and strength to those observed in the other samples (see Tables 1 and 4), the relatively low internal reliability of the RWA scale in the Norwegian sample warrants caution when interpreting the Norwegian RWA findings specifically. Future work could extend our initial cross-cultural approach by examining a broader range of cultural practices of animal exploitation and across non-Western contexts, to test the role of ideological and identity-based motives in other cultural settings.

Fourth, our studies relied exclusively on self-reported attitudes and did not capture real-world behavior. Future research could incorporate behavioral measures such as petition signing or sharing advocacy messages to test whether selective moral leniency extends to concrete actions. Moreover, examining individuals' actual involvement in cultural practices would clarify how ideological and identity-based motives are associated with engagement in these practices. Future research could also examine how selective moral leniency toward ingroup practices develops, and what role cultural socialization plays in transmitting the identity-laden meanings that render particular forms of animal exploitation morally defensible (e.g., Bray et al., 2016; Carter et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Moral concern for animals is widely shared, yet the present research demonstrates that it operates within cultural and ideological boundaries. These findings help explain why harmful practices of animal exploitation persist despite widespread opposition to animal harm. The moral principles people endorse may be selectively applied when cultural identity and tradition are implicated. Efforts to improve the lives of animals may therefore require attention not only to perceptions of harm, but also to the cultural identities and ideological motives that render certain practices morally defensible for some and morally unacceptable for others.

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Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

Notes

1. Because the item assessing whether the practices were "normal" could be interpreted as descriptive rather than evaluative, we reran all analyses excluding this item. The pattern of findings remained unchanged (see Online Supplement).
2. The Spanish and Norwegian surveys were translated by independent native-speaking academics and reviewed and improved by other native speakers in consultation with the original translator.
3. As in Study 1, we reran all the analyses excluding the item assessing whether the practices were "normal." The overall pattern of findings remained unchanged (see Online Supplement).

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