

Belief in a Just World

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Conceptualization of the Belief in a Just World

Societies are full of inequalities and injustices -- the disproportionate distribution of wealth and inequality of access to health care and education to name just a few. Individuals react differently to observed or experienced injustice. Some feel moral outrage and seek to restore justice (e.g., Montada, Schmitt, & Dalbert, 1986). Others show disdain for the victims (for a review, see Lerner & Miller, 1978) or adopt belief systems that serve to justify existing social, economic, and political arrangements (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). In other words, people confronted with injustices that are difficult to redress in reality may try to restore justice cognitively by blaming the victim or justifying the status quo.

The Just World Hypothesis

Several psychological theories propose explanations for justice-driven reactions. One of the most influential is the just world hypothesis introduced by Lerner (1965, 1980). The just world hypothesis states that people need to believe in a just world in which everyone gets what they deserve and deserves what they get. This belief enables them to deal with their social environment as though it were stable and orderly and thus serves important adaptive functions. As a result, people are motivated to defend their belief in a just world when it is threatened by injustices, either experienced or observed. If possible, justice is restored in reality (e.g., by compensating victims). If the injustice seems unlikely to be resolved in reality, however, people

restore justice cognitively by re-evaluating the situation in line with their belief in a just world.

This cognitive process is called the assimilation of injustice.

This just world dynamic was first evidenced by Lerner and Simmons (1966). These researchers confronted their participants with an “innocent victim,” a young woman participating in a learning task who was punished for each mistake by being administered seemingly painful electric shocks. When led to believe that the experiment would continue in the same way, the participants showed disdain for the victim on an adjective measure; when led to believe that the victim would be compensated for the pain of the electric shocks by receiving money for each correct answer in a second part of the experiment, they stopped showing disdain. Finally, nearly all participants who were given the choice between continuing the shock condition and switching to the compensation condition voted for the latter. Note, however, that merely voting to award the victim compensation did not stop participants from derogating the victim. It was only when they were certain that compensation would be given that the injustice was no longer assimilated. This innocent victim paradigm remains the most influential in modern experimental just world research; it is only the type of innocent victim that has changed (e.g., Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2007).

The Belief in a Just World as a Disposition

A substantial amount of research on belief in a just world has been experimental in nature (for a review, see Hafer & Bègue, 2005), focusing primarily on the maladaptive functions of the belief in a just world, such as disdain for the victim. Since the 1970s, however, another strand of research has examined individual differences in the belief in a just world and found that it also serves important adaptive functions (for a review, see Furnham, 2003). This research agenda was triggered by the introduction of the first belief in a just world scale by Rubin and Peplau (1973, 1975), which assessed individual differences in the belief that the world is generally a just place.

This approach allowed the role of the belief in a just world to be investigated within the framework of personality dispositions, and positive associations were found particularly with authoritarianism and internal locus of control (for a review, see Furnham & Procter, 1989).

Justice motive versus justice motivation. In the context of just world research and theory, scholars often speak of the justice motive (e.g., Ross & Miller, 2002). The shift from the experimental to the individual differences approach to the belief in a just world made it necessary to differentiate between a justice motive and justice motivation. Motives are individual dispositions reflecting individual differences in the tendency to strive for a specific goal. A justice motive is thus an individual disposition to strive for justice as an end itself. According to Lerner (1977), the individual belief in a just world can be interpreted as an indicator of such a justice motive. The belief in a just world indicates a personal contract; the more people want to rely on being treated justly by others, the more obligated they should feel to behave justly themselves. Thus, the stronger the belief in a just world, the stronger the justice motive. Experimental just world research typically does not assess individual differences, however, but interprets experimental reactions in the light of just world reasoning. Such research thus addresses justice motivation, and not the justice motive as an individual differences disposition. Motivation can be defined as a person's orientation toward a specific goal in a specific situational state; thus, justice motivation means the orientation toward justice in a given situation. Justice motivation is triggered by specific situational circumstances in interaction with personal dispositions. In the case of justice motivation, that personal disposition may be the justice motive or other dispositions (e.g., Lind & van den Bos, 2002; Miller, 1999).

Differentiation of the belief in a just world disposition. Since the 1990s, more studies have investigated the positive as well as the negative social consequences of the belief in a just world, and the focus of these investigations has been extended to cover the consequences of holding a

belief in a just world for the believers. Based on suggestions originating from earlier research (Furnham & Procter, 1989; Lerner & Miller, 1978), these studies have shown that it is necessary to distinguish the belief in a personal just world, in which one is usually treated fairly, from the belief in a general just world or the belief in a just world for others, in which people in general get what they deserve (Dalbert, 1999; Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996). In line with the self-serving bias in general (Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990) and in fairness reasoning in particular (Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985), research evidenced that people tend to endorse the personal more strongly than the general belief in a just world and that the two constructs have a different meaning. The personal belief in a just world is a better predictor of adaptive outcomes (e.g., subjective well-being), and the belief in a just world for others or in general is a better predictor for example of harsh social attitudes (e.g., Bègue & Muller, 2006).

Of course, other differentiations of the just world construct have also been proposed. To give just two examples for the general just world belief: A general belief in immanent justice has been distinguished from a general belief in ultimate justice (Maes & Kals, 2002), and a general belief in distributive justice has been distinguished from a general belief in procedural justice (Lucas, Alexander, Firestone, & LeBreton, 2007). Finally, the general belief in a just world has been differentiated from the general belief in an *unjust* world (Dalbert, Lipkus, Sallay, & Goch, 2001; Loo, 2002). This research showed that general belief in a just world should not be seen as a bipolar construct, but as a two-dimensional one. Because the differentiation between a more general and a more personal just world belief thus far seems to be the most widespread and well-examined distinction, however, the present summary focuses on research on general and personal just world beliefs.

Measures of the Belief in a Just World

The starting point for individual differences research on the belief in a just world was Rubin and Peplau's (1975) 20-item Belief in a Just World Scale (sample items: "Basically, the world is a just place," "Men who keep in shape have little chance of suffering a heart attack," "Good deeds often go unnoticed and unrewarded"). This scale was later criticized as being heterogeneous in content (e.g., Furnham & Procter, 1989): It included both general and domain-specific items, as well as items on the belief in an unjust world, and items tapping other constructs, such as authoritarianism (e.g., "When parents punish their children it is almost always for good reasons"). Consequently, some researchers used a subsample of the general items to assess general just world belief (e.g., Steensma & van Dijke, 2006). In the light of these criticisms, two homogenous general just world scales were developed. Dalbert, Montada, and Schmitt (1987) constructed a homogenous six-item scale tapping general belief in a just world (sample item: "I think people try to be fair when making important decisions"), which shows convergent validity with the Rubin and Peplau scale, is independent of social desirability (Loo, 2002), and has been used in numerous studies (e.g., Allen, Ng, & Leiser, 2005). In addition, Lipkus (1991) constructed a seven-item Global Belief in a Just World Scale that is positively associated with the Rubin and Peplau scale and has also been successfully implemented in several studies (e.g., Hafer, 2000b). All three general just world scales are positively correlated with each other (Lipkus et al., 1996). Surprisingly, however, although there are at least two homogenous, short, and valid measures of general just world belief, the 20-item Rubin and Peplau scale is still in use (e.g., Edlund, Sagarin, & Johnson, 2007). Finally, in line with the differentiation of the just world construct, Lipkus and colleagues (1996) and Dalbert (1999) introduced reliable scales differentiating the belief in a just world for others or in a general from the belief in a personal just world.

Belief in a Just World and Other Personality Dispositions

One of the first associations observed between the belief in a just world and other personality dispositions was the positive correlation between general just world belief and *religiosity* (Dalbert & Katona-Sallay, 1996; Rubin & Peplau, 1973). Research on the differences between the two has confirmed that they are distinct dispositions (e.g., Hui, Chan, & Chan, 1989), and cross-cultural research has found few differences in the just world belief across cultures with contrasting religious and political backgrounds (e.g., Furnham, 1993). A positive and sometimes substantial association has also been found between *authoritarianism* and general just world belief (for a review, see Furnham & Procter, 1989). Analyses of the common factor structure of the two constructs support the two-factor hypothesis and their differential meaning, with the belief in a just world providing a more positive outlook than authoritarianism (Dalbert, 1992; Lerner, 1978). The positive associations repeatedly observed between just world belief and *internal locus of control* have prompted speculation about an overlap between these two constructs as well (for a review, see Furnham & Procter, 1989). The two constructs should be distinct from a theoretical perspective, however. The belief in personal agency is consistent with the belief in a just world as long as the justice principle endorsed is the equity norm. Other ideas of justice (e.g., the equality or the need principle of justice or the belief in a just God) are not consistent with the belief in internal control. Finally, there is some evidence to suggest that the belief in a just world as a personality trait is correlated with *global personality dimensions*. In particular, empirical findings indicate a negative relationship between personal just world belief and neuroticism, consistent with the positive outlook that the belief in a just world provides (e.g., Lipkus et al., 1996). Nevertheless, studies controlling for neuroticism evidenced the incremental validity of the personal just world belief (e.g., Dalbert & Dzuka, 2004). Taken collectively, research supports the differential validity of the belief in a just world within the network of personality dispositions.

Functions of the Belief in a Just World

In the last decade, research has shown that the belief in a just world as a personality disposition serves at least three primarily adaptive functions and can thus be seen as a resource that sustains subjective well-being (Dalbert, 2001). This research is summarized in the next four sections.

Belief in a Just World and the Assimilation of Injustice

When individuals with a strong just world belief experience an injustice that they do not believe can be resolved in reality, they try to assimilate the experience to their just world belief. This can be done for example by justifying the experienced unfairness as being at least partly self-inflicted (e.g., Bulman & Wortman, 1977), by playing down the unfairness (Lipkus & Siegler, 1993), by avoiding self-focused rumination (Dalbert, 1997), or by forgiving (Strelan, 2007). As a result of these mechanisms, positive relationships have been observed between the belief in a just world and justice judgments in various domains of life. Most research into the assimilation function of the just world belief have dealt with blaming the victim and justice judgments.

Blaming the Victim

A wealth of evidence from traditional research into the just world construct shows that individuals confronted by unfairness are motivated to defend their just world belief. When observers are given the opportunity to adequately compensate an “innocent” victim (e.g., Berscheid & Walster, 1967) and thus restore justice in reality, nearly all choose to do so (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). If they are not in a position to secure compensation for the victim, observers tend to defend their belief in a just world by psychological means. Two of these means have been examined in detail in just world research. Observers can either show disdain for victims, reasoning that their fate is a deserved punishment for a bad character (characterological

attribution), or they can blame victims for having inflicted their fate upon themselves -- after all, a self-inflicted fate is not unfair (behavioral attribution). Just world research has shown that observers prefer to blame the victim rather than to show disdain (e.g., Lerner, 1965). The more a fate is seen as self-inflicted, the less disdain is observed (e.g., Lerner & Matthews, 1967). In sum, when people are confronted with the victim of an unjust fate, blaming the victim seems to be a crucial element in the defense of their belief in a just world.

Similar mechanisms can be assumed to operate for the victims of injustice themselves. Comer and Laird (1975) have shown experimentally that internal attributions seem to be a way of reevaluating one's fate as just. The significance of causal attributions, and especially of internal attributions, has thus been a subject of much discussion in the context of the just world hypothesis (e.g., Lerner & Miller, 1978). People with a strong just world belief are expected to be motivated to defend their belief by making internal attributions of negative outcomes, thus maintaining their subjective well-being. Although some research evidenced the hypothesized positive association between just world belief and internal attributions of the victims themselves (e.g., Hafer & Correy, 1999; Kiecolt-Glaser & Williams, 1987), other studies found no association between them (e.g., Agrawal & Dalal, 1993; Fetchenhauer, Jacobs, & Belschak (2005). Overall, then, the pattern of results for the belief in a just world and victims' internal attribution is rather mixed.

Justice Judgments

As a consequence of the assimilation process, individuals with a strong just world belief are expected to evaluate observed events and events in their own life as being more just. For example, school students with a strong belief in a personal just world have been found to be more likely to evaluate their school grades and their teachers', peers', and parents' behavior toward them as just (Correia & Dalbert, 2007; Dalbert & Stoeber, 2006). Similarly, prisoners

with a strong personal just worlds belief were more likely to evaluate the justice of the legal proceedings leading to their conviction, the treatment by their prison officers, and decisions on prison affairs as more just (Dalbert & Filke, 2007; Otto & Dalbert, 2005).

The personal just world belief is usually seen as a personal disposition, but results indicating an additional, reverse effect of justice experiences on the belief in a just world qualify this assumption. Research has shown that justice experiences in the school and the family modify the personal just world belief (Dalbert & Stoeber, 2006), and that factors such as length of imprisonment (Otto & Dalbert, 2005), monotony at work, and mobbing experiences at work (Cubela Adoric & Kvartuc, 2007; Dzuka & Dalbert, 2007; Otto & Schmidt, 2007) are negatively related to the personal just world belief. Thus, the belief in a personal just world must be seen as a partly experiential construct (Maes & Schmitt, 2004). Nevertheless, an unambiguous pattern of results clearly indicates that a strong personal just world belief leads to events being evaluated as just. Cubela Adoric and Kvartuc (2007) have suggested that injustice experiences only impact the belief in a just world when they reach a specific degree of adversity. Further studies are needed to determine under which conditions the just world belief fosters the assimilation of injustice and under which conditions injustice can no longer be assimilated, but instead undermines the belief in a just world.

Belief in a Just World and the Trust in Justice

People with a strong belief in a just world are thought to be confident in being treated justly by others, and it is this trust in particular that is hypothesized to give the just world belief the character of a resource in everyday life. Assuming that people get what they deserve, they will be punished for deceiving others. Accordingly, in a just world, people are expected to be honest with one another, and people who have been deceived may conclude that they deserved it in some way. It can thus be hypothesized that people with a strong just world belief prefer not to

think they have been deceived or taken advantage of. Research has shown the expected positive association of just world belief with general interpersonal trust (e.g., Bègue, 2002; Zuckerman & Gerbasi, 1977), trust in societal institutions (Correia & Vala, 2004), and young adolescents trust in the justice of their future workplace (Sallay, 2004). This trust in future justice has a number of implications.

Risk Perception

Individuals with a strong just world belief are convinced that good things happen to good people and that bad things happen to bad people. Because individuals tend to think of themselves as good people (e.g., Brown, 1986; Messick et al., 1985), the belief in a just world can be expected to give them an optimistic outlook on the future. This buffering effect is expected to be particularly evident when people are threatened by unfairness. Lambert, Burroughs, and Nguyen (1999) were the first to study the meaning of the belief in a just world for risk perception and showed that the just world belief seems to enable fearful individuals (i.e., those high in authoritarianism) to be confident of avoiding an unjust fate. It is particularly important for individuals exposed to *external* risks -- i.e., those perceived to be controlled by others or by fate (e.g., robbery) -- rather than to *internal* risks -- i.e., those that are under their personal control (e.g., suicide) -- to be able to rely on the environment being fair. Indeed, Dalbert (2001) found that the buffering effect of the general just world belief for fearful individuals held only for external risks, and not for internal risks. Finally, Hafer, Bogaert, and McMullen (2001) found that individuals with a strong general just world belief, but low in interpersonal control, seem to put themselves at greater risk, presumably as a consequence of a lowered risk perception. In sum, the general just world belief appears to function as a buffer against the perception of external risk for those who tend to need such a buffer, but this mechanism may result in higher exposure to risks in reality.

Investment in One's Future

The belief in a just world enables individuals to rely on their good deeds being rewarded at some point in the future. The certitude that everyone will ultimately get what they deserve encourages individuals to invest in their future. In contrast, those who do not believe in a just world doubt the value of such an investment, because the return on it is uncertain. Zuckerman (1975) was the first to observe that people with a strong just world belief may choose to invest in their future when in a state of need to trust in the fairness of their own future. Hafer (2000b) corroborated these findings and demonstrated experimentally that individuals with a particular need to believe in a bright future defended their just world belief more strongly in the face of threat. In the same vein, questionnaire studies with samples of students facing the school-to-work transition (Dette, Stöber, & Dalbert, 2004), young male prisoners (Otto & Dalbert, 2005), and young adults living in assisted accommodation (Sutton & Winnard, 2007) have shown that the personal just world belief is positively associated with confidence that personal goals will be attained.

Achievement Behavior

Individuals with a strong belief in a just world show more trust in their future and in others' behavior toward them. It is thus hypothesized that they expect to be confronted with fair tasks in achievement situations, and for their efforts to be fairly rewarded. They can thus be hypothesized to feel less threatened and more challenged by the need to achieve, to experience fewer negative emotions, and to achieve better results. Tomaka and Blascovich (1994) conducted a laboratory study to test the basic hypotheses outlined above and confronted their participants with two rapid serial subtraction tasks. Participants with a strong general just world belief felt more challenged and less threatened, and performed better than those with a weak belief. Extending this laboratory research to the school and work setting, studies have revealed a positive

correlation between the personal just world belief and school achievement (Dalbert, 2001; Dalbert & Stoeber, 2005, 2006), and self-rated performance at work (Otto & Schmidt, 2007). Finally, Allen et al. (2005) have observed that nations whose citizens have stronger general just world beliefs show a faster pace of workforce modernization and GNP/capita growth.

Belief in a Just World as a Justice Motive Indicator

In a just world, a positive future is not the gift of a benevolent world, but a reward for the individual's behavior and character. Consequently, the more individuals believe in a just world, the more compelled they should feel to strive for justice themselves. The just world belief is thus indicative of a personal contract (Lerner, 1977), the terms of which oblige the individual to behave justly. Therefore, strong just world believers are more likely to help people in need (Bierhoff, Klein, & Kramp, 1991), at least as long as the victims are seen as "innocent" (DePalma, Madey, Tillman, & Wheeler, 1999) or as member of the in-group (Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2007). In addition, the belief in a just world has been shown to be one of the important correlates of social responsibility (Bierhoff, 1994), commitment to just means (Cohn & Modecki, 2007; Hafer, 2000b; Sutton & Winnard (2007), and, inversely, rule-breaking behavior (Correia & Dalbert, in press; Otto & Dalbert, 2005). Moreover, the obligation for reciprocity has been found to be stronger among individuals with a strong general just world belief (Edlund et al., 2007). Finally, a laboratory study revealed that own unjust behavior is censured by a decrease in self-esteem only for those with a strong belief in a personal just world (Dalbert, 1999).

Belief in a Just World and Subjective Well-Being

Because the main properties of the belief in a just world -- indicating commitment to a personal contract, endowing trust in the fairness of the world, and providing a framework for the interpretation of the events in one's life -- have a variety of adaptive implications, the belief in a just world can be expected to positively impact subjective well-being, either directly or indirectly,

mediated by these implications. There is ample evidence of a positive relationship between just world beliefs and subjective well-being. Moreover, research has shown that the belief in a personal just world is more important than the general just world belief in explaining well-being (Dalbert, 1999; Lipkus et al., 1996; Otto, Boos, Dalbert, Schöps, & Hoyer, 2006; Sutton & Douglas, 2005), and that this positive association between just world belief and well-being is true for non-victims (e.g., Dzuka & Dalbert, 2006; Otto & Schmidt, 2007; Ritter, Benson, & Snyder, 1990) and various groups of victims (e.g., Agrawal & Dalal, 1993; Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Otto et al., 2006). In addition, Dzuka and Dalbert (2007) demonstrated that teachers' well-being was positively associated with their belief in a personal just world and that this relationship held when exposure to student violence was controlled. This study is one of the few to have found evidence for a buffering effect of the just world belief: It was only among teachers with a weak personal just world belief that exposure to violence was associated with more negative affect; exposure to violence did not explain negative affect among those with a strong personal just world belief.

A personal resource can be defined as a personal disposition that helps people to cope with the events of their daily life. The stronger the resource, the better equipped they are to cope. A personal resource thus implies a main effect hypothesis. A personal buffer, in contrast, is usually seen as a resource that takes effect only under specific adverse conditions. A buffer thus implies a moderator hypothesis; the buffer moderates the association between strain and outcome. Overall, research findings are very much in line with the resource hypothesis and do not support the buffer hypothesis. The belief in a personal just world should thus be seen as personal resource helping to sustain the well-being of people of all ages in diverse situations, victims and non-victims alike.

The Developmental Trajectories of Belief in a Just World

Until the age of seven or eight, children typically believe in immanent justice, and they are convinced that wrongdoings are automatically punished (Piaget, 1932/1997). As they grow older, however, they slowly abandon this belief in immanent justice. As a result of cognitive development, older children and adults have no difficulty in identifying random events. Nevertheless, they sense that a random fate is unjust, and when given the possibility to justify a random fate they will do so (e.g., Jose, 1990; Weisz, 1980). Children thus develop a belief in a just world -- which can be interpreted as a more mature version of the belief in immanent justice -- the belief that people generally deserve their fate accompanied by the cognitive ability to identify causality and randomness (Raman & Winer, 2004).

During adolescence, personal and general just world beliefs emerge as two distinct beliefs. The strength of both beliefs seems to decrease slightly during adolescence and young adulthood. Both of these developmental changes -- differentiation and decline -- can be interpreted as consequences of increasing cognitive maturity. Even after its initial decline, the belief in a personal just world tends to be rather strong. The strength of just world belief seems to increase again slightly in late adulthood and old age (e.g., Dalbert, 2001; Maes & Schmitt, 2004).

The meaning of the just world belief also seems to differ systematically across the lifespan (Maes & Schmitt, 2004). In adolescence and young adulthood, especially, the just world belief's main function seems to be to provide trust in the fairness of the world, thus enabling people to master challenges in school and at the workplace and to invest in their personal goals. In old age, when the remaining lifetime is shorter, the just world belief's primary function seems to be to provide a framework to help people interpret the events of their life in a meaningful way. A strong just world belief allows older adults to see themselves as having been less discriminated against during the course of their life, prevents them from ruminating about the negative aspects of their life, and instead enables them to find meaning in it.

To explore the development of individual differences in the just world belief, studies have investigated the impact of parenting on the just world belief. In adolescence, at least (cf. Schönplflug & Bilz, 2004), there does not seem to be direct transmission from parent to child; however, parenting styles have proved to be positively associated with the children's just world belief (e.g., Dalbert & Radant, 2004). Nurture, as reflected by a harmonious family climate with a low rate of conflict and manipulation, and the experience of a just family climate are positively associated with a strong belief in a personal just world. Restriction, defined as a family orientation toward strict rules and rule reinforcement, where breaking rules has aversive consequences, is not. These findings indicate that the belief in just world is fostered by the trust in justice and is not learned by adopting social rules.

Conclusion

Just world research has shown that people need to believe in justice, and that they strive for justice in order to maintain their basic belief in a just world (e.g., Lerner & Miller, 1978). This justice motive is reflected by an interindividually varying just world disposition and explains the differences in people's striving for justice as an end in itself, including their own behavior and assimilation of observed or experienced injustices. In return, the justice motive endows trust in the fairness of the world and in being treated justly by others.

The basic idea of the just world hypothesis is that people confronted with injustices suffer and feel the unconscious need to restore justice (e.g., Lerner, 1980). As a consequence, the belief in a just world particularly impacts intuitive justice-driven reactions such as, for example, the assimilation of injustice. Thus, research suggests that the belief in a just world is an essential but unconscious source of responses to injustice, in line with the role of other implicit human motives (McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989). Justice motive theory (Dalbert, 2001) thus interprets the belief in a just world as indicating an implicit justice motive. Lerner and Goldberg

(1999) argue that conscious and intuitive justice-driven reactions co-exist, and may be elicited simultaneously in the same situation. The belief in a just world seems to operate on an unconscious level and can thus be expected to better explain intuitive than conscious reactions to injustice. Important challenges for future research on the just world construct include integrating just world research within such a broader framework and differentiating between the explanation of more controlled versus more intuitive justice-driven reactions in the light of just world reasoning.

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