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Belief in a just world for oneself versus others, social goals, and subjective well-being

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ABSTRACT

The belief in a just world (BJW) affects subjective well-being and social behavior. However, its role in shaping the social goals that underlie behavior has not been investigated. Informed by the bidimensional model of BJW, the present study examined the relations of BJW for the self (BJW-self) versus BJW for other people (BJW-others) with social goals and subjective well-being in a sample of 398 university students. As predicted, BJW-self was positively related to affiliative social goals including nurturance, intimacy, and social development goals. In contrast, BJW-others was positively related to dominance and social demonstration goals. Consistent with the bidimensional model, BJW-self and BJW-others were related to most social goals in opposing directions. The present findings indicate that BJW-self and BJW-others is not only relevant to *how* people act in relation to others, but also *why* they act the way they do.

1. Introduction

1.1. Just-world beliefs

The belief in a just world (BJW) is the conviction that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. According to Lerner's (1980) just-world theory, it arises from an implicit "personal contract" formed when children learn to eschew immediate gratification and to respect moral rules and conventions in return for longer term rewards. Faith in this personal contract gives life a sense of predictability, control, and meaning, and allows people to plan toward their futures with optimism. However, BJW is often challenged by the abundant evidence of undeserved suffering that exists in the world, including illness, poverty, and oppression. The psychological benefits of BJW motivate people to defend it against this evidence, for example, by blaming and derogating innocent victims. In the title of Lerner's (1980) book, BJW was therefore described as a "fundamental delusion": fundamental in the sense that it is crucial for individual functioning, but a delusion in the sense that it is untrue and motivationally defended.

Whereas the first decades of BJW research regarded BJW as unidimensional (e.g., Rubin & Peplau, 1975), researchers later paid attention to different dimensions of the construct, distinguishing the belief that the world is just for the self (BJW-self) from the belief that the world is just for others (BJW-others; Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996; see also Dalbert, 1999). These two dimensions are positively correlated, but have theoretically and empirically distinct functions. Theoretically, BJW-self is linked to faith in the personal contract, and research shows that it is associated with the benefits that one would expect from this faith, including higher subjective well-being (e.g., Sutton & Douglas, 2005), higher levels of prosocial behavior (Bègue, 2014), and lower levels of antisocial behavior (Bai, Liu, & Kou, 2016). Conversely, BJW-others is theoretically and empirically associated with the defense mechanisms identified by just-world theory, such as blame and derogation of innocent victims of misfortune, punitive responses to offenders, and harsh attitudes to disadvantaged groups (Bègue & Bastounis, 2003).

Underscoring the importance of distinguishing between BJW-self and BJW-others, research has shown that the two dimensions are not only related to different variables, but are also related to the same variables in opposing directions. These opposing relations may only become apparent when each dimension is controlled for the other. For example, BJW-others has been found to be positively related, and BJW-self negatively related, to antisocial behavioral intentions (Sutton & Winnard, 2007), the desire for revenge (Strelan & Sutton, 2011), neuroticism (Bollmann, Krings, Maggiori, & Rossier, 2015), support for harsh punishments of criminals (Bègue & Bastounis, 2003), and pessimism about the fulfillment of one's life goals (Sutton & Winnard, 2007).

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1.2. Just-world beliefs and social goals

Most research on BJW examines people's attitudes to past and present circumstances, rather than their goals, plans, and beliefs about the future. Nonetheless, these are of central importance for just-world theory, since faith in the personal contract ought to motivate people to form long term goals, to feel confident in achieving them, and to pursue them using socially legitimate means (Callan, Harvey, & Sutton, 2014; Lerner, 1980). Studies have generally supported this perspective in relation to people's confidence in realizing specific goals such as getting a job, buying a house, or getting married (Nudelman, Otto, & Dalbert, 2016; Sutton & Winnard, 2007). Related studies have shown that people high in BJW (these studies did not differentiate between BJW-self and BJW-others) tend to be more focused on long-term goals (Hafer, 2000). Hafer and Rubel (2015) found this relationship between BJW and long-term focus to hold only among people who, consistent with the personal contract, tend to use pro (vs. anti) social means to pursue their goals.

These findings show that just-world theory has been successful in the important task of understanding whether human behavior is focused on short- or long-term goals, and whether it is in keeping with moral norms. However, these dimensions do not capture much of the richness of human behavior. In their path through life, people may form any number of morally acceptable long-term goals, such as career success or closeness with others, to be a good leader, or to follow good leaders. They may pursue these goals by any number of morally acceptable means – for example, by working hard, or by sacrificing time to build relationships. Their day-to-day and long term decisions are informed by beliefs and desires – abstract representations including knowledge of themselves and the world, and their goals (Allport, 1937). We propose that it may be possible to expand the explanatory and predictive scope of just-world beliefs by examining how they relate to these abstract representations.

Recent research provides examples of this general principle. Bartholomaeus and Strelan (2016) showed that the relationship between BJW and forgiveness can be understood in terms of underlying representations of human nature. Those high in BJW-self tended to believe that people are capable of positive growth, and so were more likely to forgive. Those high in BJW-others tended to believe that a person's character is fixed, and so were less likely to forgive. Lucas, Rudolph, Zhdanova, Barkho, and Weidner (2014) showed that believing that others receive outcomes they deserve led Americans to support restriction of immigration because it triggered collective angst – a pessimistic view of the future of their national group.

In the present article, our focus is on the relationships between BJW and social goals. Some social goals define what people want from their relationships, such as closeness (intimacy), caring (nurturance), popularity (status), authority and influence (leadership) and coercive power (dominance). These are known as social content goals, and refer to the aspects of relationships that are important to people (Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996). Other social goals refer to people's reasons to pursue relationships in the first place, and refer not to aspects of relationships, but to what external benefits might arise from them. Thus, people may pursue relationships in order to improve their social skills and insight (social development), to prove to others (or themselves) that they are personally social competent and successful (demonstration–approach) or that they are *not* socially *in*competent or *un*successful (demonstration–avoidance). These are known as social achievement goals (Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996).

Social goals are correlated with different patterns of behavior and well-being. For example, intimacy, nurturance, and status goals are positively related to social adjustment and relationship satisfaction (Kiefer & Ryan, 2008). In contrast, dominance goals are related to aggressive behavior, unpopularity and academic underachievement (Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996). Understanding how these general social goals relate to BJW could ultimately lead to a theoretical specification of the behaviors that are associated with BJW, and also the social motivations that link BJW to well-being. Such a theory would be in keeping with the established characterization of goals as located at an intermediate stage between motives and specific action plans, described by Allport (1937) as the "doing" side of personality.

In its original formulation, just-world theory does not describe the relational consequences of just-world beliefs, including the social goals that people pursue. However, theory and research on the bidimensional model of BJW suggest that—since BJW-self fosters the disciplined and morally legitimate pursuit of long term goals—it should also foster the pursuit of affiliative social goals such as intimacy, nurturance, and social development. Conversely, BJW-others motivates people to treat others as they deserve (Bègue & Bastounis, 2003; Sutton & Winnard, 2007) and so may make powerful and prestigious positions attractive because they enable the distribution of rewards and punishments. Further, BJW-others also motivates people to perceive that others are treated as they deserve. It may therefore be an important enabler of the pursuit of personal power and prestige, by legitimizing the adverse effects of that pursuit on other people (Strelan & van Prooijen, 2014). Thus, BJW-others is likely to foster dominance, status, leadership, and demonstration goals.

1.3. The present study

The present study aims to connect, and therefore contribute, to two previously separate literatures: the study of just-world belief, and the study of social goals. In a cross-sectional design, university students completed measures of BJW-self, BJW-others, social goals, and three indicators of subjective well-being: flourishing, positive affect balance, and optimistic future-directed thinking. Based on previous theory and research on BJW-self and BJW-others, we predicted that BJW-self would be related to prosocial and affiliative social goals (including nurturance, intimacy, and social development goals) whereas BJW-others would be related to goals related to power and status (including status, leadership, dominance, demonstration–approach, and demonstration-avoidance goals).

Further analyses were more exploratory. First, because previous research indicates that BJW-others and BJW-self frequently act as mutual suppressors, we explored the possibility that BJW-self and BJW-others are related to social goals in opposing directions (employing multiple regression analyses and examining semipartial correlations). Second, we explored relationships between social goals and general indices of well-being. Relatively little is known about these relationships, since past research on social goals has largely focused on social and academic outcomes. Further, since relationships between BJW and well-being are well-established, the present research offers an opportunity to conduct a first preliminary investigation of the possibility that social goals may be relevant to those relationships.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

398 students (47 male, 348 female, 3 undeclared) studying at the [name of university] were recruited via the School of Psychology's Research Participation Scheme. Students volunteered to participate for extra course credits and completed all measures online using the Qualtrics® platform, which required to respond to all questions to prevent missing data. Mean age of students was 19.6 years ($SD = 3.6$). Students indicated their ethnicity as White (67%), Asian (14%), Black (10%), mixed race (6%), and other (3%).