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# How fair is my world? Development of just world beliefs among Kenyan students

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## ABSTRACT

This study is a cross-sectional analysis of Kenyan adolescents' beliefs in a just world (BJW). Prior research suggests that BJW declines across adolescence and differentiate between Personal and General BJW. However, little research has been conducted in African samples or developing economies. Adolescents from three schools in Western Kenya ( $n = 1960$ ) completed the questionnaires to understand how their Personal and General BJW differed across grades, and between schools, tribes, and sexes. Contrary to prior research, there was not a downward trend of BJW across adolescence. Instead, the trajectory was dependent upon the school and demographics. There were significant differences between males and females, which may reflect gender inequalities of the traditional Kenyan society. There were also significant differences between tribal groups, with those in dominant or majority tribes having higher perceptions of justice. This study discusses the role that inequality plays in adolescents' BJW and the implications for future cross-cultural research. © 2016 The Foundation for Professionals in Services for Adolescents. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to understand how Kenyan students' Belief in a Just World (BJW) develops across adolescence, in different educational contexts, and among groups of differing social contexts. During adolescence, individuals develop their sense of abstract reasoning and begin to construct meaningful opinions about values such as fairness and justice in society. Under the just world theory framework (Lerner, 1980), prior research has shown that adolescents tend to think the world is less fair as they mature (Dalbert, 2009). However, developmental research has primarily focused on middle class populations and no research has yet drawn a sample from any African country. This study provides a representative sample of Kenyan adolescents from differing economic, tribal and educational contexts.

*Belief in a just world: general and personal*

The belief in a just world (BJW) is the extent to which someone believes the world is fair. First described by Lerner and Simmons in 1966, this construct was first used to explain the human tendency to blame the victim. If the world is a fair place, then it is plausible to believe that tragedies can be avoided through good behavior. Although BJW is associated with harsh social attitudes (i.e. victim-blaming), it is an important construct to help sustain an internal locus of control and believe

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that hard work will be compensated (Dalbert & Sallay, 2004). People are motivated to believe that the world is a just place where people get what they deserve and determine their own fate (Lerner, 1980). The belief in a just world has three main functions: (1) Establish a confidence that one will be treated fairly; (2) provide a conceptual framework to assimilate events and make attributions; (3) and institute a personal contract with society to uphold common values (Dalbert & Sallay, 2004; Peter, Dalbert, Kloeckner, & Radant, 2012).

BJW can be seen as a double-edged sword. It is positively correlated with victim-blaming, but has strong predictive value for many positive psychological traits such as mental health (Adorić, 2011), hope for the future (Adorić, 2011; Dalbert, 1999, 2009; Hafer, 2000; Sutton & Winnard, 2007), and subjective well-being (Correia, Kamble, & Dalbert, 2009; Dalbert, 2002; Fox, Elder, Gater, & Johnson, 2010). BJW is a necessary psychological construct, but also innately flawed because the world is not fair (Lerner & Lerner, 1981). To help explain these apparent contradictions, BJW is divided into two constructs: *Personal BJW* (belief that one's personal life is fair) and the *General BJW* (belief that society is fair).

Personal BJW is the extent to which people believe their world is *individually* fair and they get what they deserve in their daily interactions (Dalbert, 2009). Having a high Personal BJW is protective against the pervading fear of random injustices, and enables a high internal locus of control and a sense of safety within familiar circles (Dalbert, 2009). Those with higher Personal BJW tend to believe that their hard work will be compensated, a precondition for establishing long-term goals (Dalbert, 2004). Personal BJW is shaped earlier in development through the consistency and fairness of family climate and individual experiences (Dalbert & Radant, 2004). It tends to decrease in adolescence with the increasing sophistication of moral development, and understanding the fallibility of authorities (Dalbert & Dzuka, 2004).

General BJW is the extent to which people believe the world *at large* is fair. This belief incorporates assumptions about the broader society and is not necessarily activated in the personal realm. For example, people can hold on to the belief that they will be personally treated fairly (high Personal BJW), yet still acknowledge injustices in society (low General BJW). General BJW is connected to people's opinions of societal institutions such as the health care system, major companies, and local and global political institutions (Correia & Vala, 2004). A high General BJW is also more predictive of harsh social attitudes, such as victim-blaming (Dalbert, 2009), because it endorses the fairness of systems and others' experiences. When people believe the world is generally fair, yet cannot restore justice tangibly (by helping or witnessing restoration), they tend to restore justice psychologically by blaming the victim in order to diminish cognitive dissonance with their BJW (Lerner & Simmons, 1966).

#### Development across adolescence

In adolescence, General BJW and Personal BJW develop into two distinct constructs (Dalbert, 2001; Dalbert & Sallay, 2004). Personal BJW forms in childhood and is heavily dependent upon parenting style, while General BJW is more abstract in nature and tends to branch out from Personal BJW in adolescence with the increase of abstract cognition (Dalbert & Sallay, 2004). As adolescents age, they increase their understanding of the complexity of social interactions and begin to contemplate the fairness and legitimacy of the governmental systems and form opinions through multiple perspective-taking. When adolescents understand authorities to be fallible, their BJW is threatened because rules and regulations may be faulty and unjust. At this point, adolescents may re-evaluate their BJW.

One of the clearest developmental trajectories in the literature of BJW development is the decrease that occurs in both General and Personal BJW across adolescence (Adorić, 2004; Barreiro, 2013; Dalbert, 2001; Dalbert & Dzuka, 2004; Dalbert & Sallay, 2004; Furnham & Rajamanickam, 1992; Maes & Schmitt, 2004; Oppenheimer, 2005, 2006; Peter & Dalbert, 2010; Sanches & Gouveia-Pereira, 2010; Schönplflug & Bilz, 2004). General and Personal BJW decline throughout secondary education, but they decrease at different rates (Adorić, 2004, 2011; Dalbert & Dzuka, 2004; Dalbert & Sallay, 2004; Schönplflug & Bilz, 2004). Personal BJW tends to be higher than General BJW across all ages, and with the gap between them increasing with age (Adorić, 2004; Oppenheimer, 2006). It is hypothesized that Personal and General BJW decline at different rates to help adolescents slowly adapt to the harsh understanding that the world is not consistently fair (Dalbert & Dzuka, 2004; Vicente, 2010). Past research has shown that General BJW's decrease does not pose as much of a threat to adolescents' sense of safety as long as the Personal BJW is high. A high Personal BJW enables individuals to protect themselves from the threat of random tragedies, and sustain their motivation to fulfill their personal contract and hope that their hard work will be compensated.

Previous research has indicated that different educational environments can influence the development of General and Personal BJW across adolescence. A study conducted in German high schools reported differences of General and Personal BJW among the academic tracks (Dalbert, 2001, p. 60). All academic tracks reflected the gradual decrease in BJW, but the rate of decline and the discrepancy between General and Personal were different across schools. Those in higher academic tracks had a greater gap between Personal and General BJW, with Personal BJW consistently scoring higher than General BJW. In contrast, those in lower tracks had similar Personal and General BJW values. The study concluded that the distinction between the Personal and General BJW observed in the higher tracks was because of greater intellectual development due to better education. The current study assesses the differences between grade levels in three different schools to better comprehend the developmental trajectory of BJW across different educational environments. If the conclusion of Dalbert's (2001) study could be generalized to Kenyan adolescents, students in the more selective schools would show a greater gap between their General and Personal BJW compared to those in the less selective schools. However, an alternative explanation to the finding is that those in the higher tracks had greater social privilege and, therefore, had higher expectations of fairness. This study helps shed light on the role of privilege and educational contexts.

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