



## Belief in a Just World and secondary victimization: The role of adolescent deviant behavior



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### ABSTRACT

Belief in a Just World research found evidence that one feels threatened whenever one witnesses an innocent victim suffering, often resorting to secondary victimization to neutralize the observed injustice. However, literature has neglected the explanatory power of adolescent deviant behavior in victimization processes. This study ( $n = 284$  students) aims to determine the impact of the adolescents' deviant behavior, BJW and victim's innocence on secondary victimization. Additionally, we analyzed juvenile deviant behavior's impact on victim identification. Juveniles who committed more deviant behaviors identified less with the victim than those with lower deviance levels. The interaction effects show that juveniles who are strong just world believers and have higher delinquency engaged significantly more in secondary victimization when confronted with an innocent victim. These results clarify the role played by adolescent deviant behavior and BJW in secondary victimization judgments regarding situations with innocent and non-innocent victims.

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### 1. Introduction

Belief in a Just World theory (BJW) (Lerner, 1965; Lerner, 1980) explains the need to cognitively reconstruct observed injustice in such a way that it appears just, thus maintaining the idea of a meaningful world and reducing feelings of distress caused by the acknowledgement of arbitrary injustice. It promotes feelings of general well-being and acts as a positive illusion to sustain mental health (e.g. Correia & Vala, 2004; Dzuka & Dalbert, 2006) by promoting the feeling of internal control over one's own results (Rubin & Peplau, 1975). To maintain the illusion of stability, we preserve BJW through mechanisms that restore justice both psychologically (e.g. secondary victimization) and behaviorally (e.g. compensating the victim) (Furnham, 2003).

However, BJW itself is insufficient to prevent individuals from engaging in delinquent activity particularly during adolescence (e.g. Sanches, Gouveia-Pereira, & Carugati, 2011). Nevertheless, several studies have suggested BJW as one of the critical factors to determine whether adolescent criminality develops to life-course persistent or remains adolescent-limited (e.g. Moffitt, 2006).

BJW is negatively correlated with the possibility of engagement in recidivist criminal activity (Otto & Dalbert, 2005) and is associated with fewer delinquent intentions in adulthood (Sutton &

Winnard, 2007). Young offenders with high BJW are more prone to show less disciplinary problems during jail time (Dalbert & Filke, 2007) because they often perceive punishment as partially self-inflicted and resort to self-blaming (Dalbert & Dzuka, 2004). Students with strong BJW are also more likely to intuitively avoid deviant behavior in the form of bullying (Correia & Dalbert, 2008; Donat, Umlauf, Dalbert, & Kamble, 2012) and teacher justice has been found to fully mediate the relation between BJW, cheating and delinquency (Donat, Dalbert, & Kamble, 2014).

#### 1.1. Victim's innocence

Victims objectively perceived as innocent are often pointed out as more responsible in situations that in any way they were able to predict or avoid (e.g. Correia & Vala, 2003; Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2008).

The discomfort caused by the acknowledgement of an innocent victim is particularly strong when the victim's suffering is persistent (e.g. Correia & Vala, 2003). A non-innocent victim, however, has no impact on the observer because in a just world reckless actions are punished. Research has not only shown that victims in general tend to be secondarily victimized but particularly that innocent victims are more victimized than non-innocent victims (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). The unconscious and irrational nature of the threatening process can help explain why the individual is impelled to disregard

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largely accepted social norms (such as not to blame an innocent victim) when engaging in secondary victimization.

### 1.2. Secondary victimization

Secondary victimization is a common yet contradictory phenomenon (Hafer & Bêgue, 2005) given that observers contribute to intensify the victim's suffering even when she's explicitly recognized as innocent. In fact, most individuals stated they wouldn't approve nor resort to secondary victimization when confronted with victims of a persistent suffering except in situations involving a non-innocent victim (Alves & Correia, 2009; Alves & Correia, 2010).

Examples of extensively studied victimization strategies are victim's deservingness (e.g. Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2001), victim blaming (e.g. Aguiar, Vala, Correia, & Pereira, 2008), justice judgments (e.g. Sebbly & Johnston, 2012), derogation of the victim (e.g. Correia & Vala, 2003) and minimization of the victim's suffering (e.g. Correia & Vala, 2003). When facing a threat to the BJW, different victimization strategies can actually co-exist and work together (e.g. Defjudicibus & McCabe, 2001; Furnham & Procter, 1992).

Psychological distancing has often been suggested as essential to understand the secondary victimization (e.g. Correia et al., 2012). Perceived similarity has been used as a measure of association/dissociation towards the victim (e.g. Hafer, 2000) and observers adjust blame assignments accordingly (Shaver, 1970). Similarly, Grubb and Harrower (2009) also found blame attributions to be negatively correlated with the victim identification.

## 2. The present study

This study aims to analyze the impact of BJW, victim's innocence and adolescent deviant behavior on the use of secondary victimization strategies.

We focus on General BJW because it concerns justice in others' lives (Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996) and it has been found to be a good predictor of harsh social attitudes (e.g. Bêgue & Muller, 2006; Testé & Perrin, 2013), enhancing mechanisms of secondary victimization. Moreover, victim's innocence as an independent variable has been extensively reported in literature and concerns the degree a victim is perceived as more or less innocent of her fate. While several BJW related studies have used a sample of young detainees (e.g. Dalbert & Filke, 2007), to our knowledge none so far explored deviant behavior as an independent measure to explain the engagement in victimization processes. Because deviancy has proven to be a crucial factor to take into account when studying justice beliefs, particularly amongst adolescents, we believe more empirical studies are needed. Consequently, we intend to study how BJW interacts with victim's innocence perception amongst adolescents with more and less deviant behaviors in the use of secondary victimization. In our study, the secondary victimization scale comprises three important items: justice of the victim's situation, deservingness of the victim and minimization of victim's suffering.

Additionally, because perceived observer–victim similarity influences identification levels (e.g. Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Hafer, 2000) which in turn can impact victimization judgments, we will first explore how deviant behavior as a feature of the observer can influence victim identification.

Accordingly, we formed two hypotheses:

**H1.** : There are significant differences between juveniles with more and less deviant behaviors in identification levels towards the victim so that juveniles with more deviant behaviors will present lesser victim identification than juveniles with fewer deviant behaviors.

**H2.** : Juveniles with more deviant behaviors and high BJW will engage significantly more in secondary victimization in the innocent victim condition than in the non-innocent victim condition.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants

Participants were 284 students from three public schools and a young offender's institution in the Lisbon area, 163 males and 121 females between 13 and 20 years old ( $M = 16.07$ ;  $SD = 1.58$ ). Out of the 284 participants, 55 (19.4%) had failed once, 25 (8.8%) had failed twice and 14 (4.9%) had failed a school year three or more times. An independent samples t-test was conducted for school failure (presence; absence) on the secondary victimization index (see Section 3.3.5) and we found no statistically significant effect ( $t_{(282)} = 0.228$ ,  $p = 0.82$ ). Additionally, a one-way ANOVA for number of school years failed (one year; two years; three or more years) on the secondary victimization index showed no statistically significant effect ( $F_{(3; 283)} = 1.069$ ,  $p = 0.36$ ), confirming that school failure has no influence in secondary victimization judgments.

### 3.2. Experimental design

This study has a between-subjects design of 2 (victim's innocence: innocent; non-innocent)  $\times$  2 (deviant behavior: more; less)  $\times$  2 (BJW: high; low), with the first variable being manipulated and the second and third measured.

### 3.3. Procedure and measures

School authorities and the Directorate-General of Reintegration and Prison Services were contacted for study approval and parents' consent forms were then collected. Students were told they would participate in two studies; the first would consist in validating two scales to the Portuguese population and the second would analyze how adolescents interpret a news piece. All responses were given on 7-point scales with endpoints ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree", except in the deviant behavior variety scale by Sanches, Gouveia-Pereira, Marôco, Gomes, and Roncon (2016) (see Section 3.3.3). Participants were assured of the anonymous and voluntary nature of the study. Questionnaires were applied in the classroom during lessons time. After questionnaire completion, participants were debriefed and thanked for their cooperation.

#### 3.3.1. Victim's innocence

As done in previous studies (e.g. Aguiar et al., 2008; Correia & Vala, 2003; Sebbly & Johnston, 2012), we created a victimization cover story consisting of a news piece supposedly taken from a local newspaper, depicting a robbery between two teenagers. The victim was named X, to insure her/his anonymity. The story portrayed an adolescent harassed by another adolescent, who violently threatened the first one, ordering him to hand his phone and wallet. The two versions differed in small manipulated cues, intended to orient the reader towards victim's innocence or non-innocence.<sup>1</sup>

To pilot the stories and ensure they were perceived differently, we created an index with the questions "X could have avoided the assault", "X is responsible for the assault", "X is guilty for the assault" and "X is innocent about what happened to him/her" ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ) and found statistically significant differences between the two scenarios ( $t_{(52)} = -3.068$ ;  $p = 0.003$ ).

Manipulation of the victim's innocence was checked through agreement with the sentences: "X could have avoided the assault" and X "is innocent about what happened to him/her". An independent samples t-test showed statistically significant differences regarding both avoidance of the situation ( $t_{(259)} = -15.822$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and victim's innocence ( $t_{(259)} = 8.380$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) between the two scenarios (innocent

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for a detailed description of the stories.

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