



Just world beliefs and forgiveness: The mediating role of implicit theories of relationships



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ABSTRACT

The belief in a just world (BJW) influences how people navigate their relationships. BJW effects differ depending on the extent to which one's BJW is concerned with the self (BJW-self) and others (BJW-other). In this study ($N = 160$) we replicated previous research showing that BJW-self encourages forgiveness operationalized as benevolence and extended it to show, for the first time, that BJW-self predicts decisional forgiveness but, unexpectedly, not emotional forgiveness. Conversely, BJW-other encourages negative responding. Most importantly, the study makes a new contribution to BJW theorizing by integrating principles from implicit theories of relationships. Mediation models indicated that BJW-self obtains its association with forgiveness through growth beliefs, whereas BJW-other is associated with negative responding via the agency of destiny beliefs.

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1. Introduction

Justice is fundamentally important to humans, to the point that we are theorized to possess a pre-conscious need to believe that the world is a fair place (see Lerner, 1980). *Believing* that the world is a fair place provides people with a conceptual framework for making sense of the world. For many people, the need to believe in a just world is so strong that they will subsequently put in effort, whether rationally or irrationally, and actually or psychologically, to defend against the inevitable instances when the world is not just (Lerner, 1980). The pay-off is immense. Maintaining a belief in a just world affords individuals confidence in the predictability of events and outcomes, thereby facilitating a sense of control, providing a buffer against life's travesties and inequities (e.g., Dalbert, 2002), and empowering investment in and commitment to future-oriented actions and goals (see Hafer & Rubel, 2015).

Further, people delineate the world according to whether it is just for others (BJW-other) or for the self (BJW-self) (e.g., Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996). When individuals can see no practical way to restore justice for others, or have no access to mitigating information, they are likely to derogate or blame victims (Lerner, 1980). If others – including transgressors (see Strelan & Sutton, 2011) – can be reframed as deserving their outcomes, observers are able to maintain the view that the world treats others fairly. Conversely, when individuals are themselves

victims, the extent to which the world treats the self fairly becomes salient, and contrastingly different responses emerge. Rather than the expression of harsh social attitudes, BJW-self is associated with approach-oriented inclinations, most notably forgiveness (e.g., Strelan & Sutton, 2011).

The relation between BJW-self and forgiveness is likely due to shared variance on inclusive inclinations such as trait gratitude (Strelan, 2007) and self-transcending values (Strelan & McKee, 2014). However, because BJW-self and BJW-other are parallel constructs (Lipkus et al., 1996), a prosocial orientation does not account for the negative effects of BJW-other. Thus, in this article we employ a theoretical perspective that allows us to explain relations between forgiveness and both spheres of BJW at the same time. In so doing, we make a new contribution to BJW theorizing by integrating into the BJW framework principles from a more localized worldview, that which is concerned with individuals' *implicit theories of relationships* (ITRs; see Knee, Patrick, & Lonsbary, 2003). In the ITR framework, individuals are disposed towards viewing relationships in terms that are idealistic (destiny beliefs) and realistic (growth beliefs). Each perspective results in strikingly divergent outcomes, particularly in the context of transgressions. In effect, we propose that individuals' ITRs play an explanatory (i.e., mediating) role in the relation between each form of BJW and forgiveness.

1.1. Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a multi-faceted construct that refers to the process by which victims move from being negatively to positively disposed

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towards a transgressor (e.g., McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). Although forgiveness may be measured at the trait-level, in this study we focused on forgiveness as a response to a specific transgression.

Transgression-specific forgiveness possesses at least two dimensions. One involves an internal transformation (e.g., Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007). Even if they do not feel like forgiving, victims may realize, at a cognitive level, the personal and relationship-oriented benefits of forgiving (for reviews, see Worthington, Witvliet, et al., 2007; McCullough, 2008). Accordingly, victims may engage in *decisional forgiveness* (e.g., Davis et al., 2015; Worthington, Witvliet, et al., 2007). Victims may also experience *emotional forgiveness* (Worthington, Witvliet, et al., 2007). Emotional forgiveness refers to an affective state reflecting the extent to which transgressions no longer negatively affects victims such that they are able to move on.

Internalized forgiveness often manifests itself in a second, interpersonal dimension, so that transgressors become aware that victims no longer hold a grudge – indicated by the *absence of negative responding* – and instead possess a new *benevolent* attitude towards them (McCullough et al., 2003).

1.2. BJW-self and forgiveness

There are three main, inter-related reasons why BJW-self encourages forgiving. First, BJW-self is adaptive, insofar as it provides individuals with a sense of control (e.g., Dalbert, 2002). Transgressions threaten personal control, but forgiveness helps victims to regulate their affective and cognitive responses so that they no longer carry the burden hoisted upon them by the transgression (e.g., Worthington, Witvliet, et al., 2007). As such, forgiving as an intrapersonal phenomenon serves the adaptive function of BJW-self (e.g., Dalbert, 2002).

Second, there is a moral imperative for individuals with strong BJW-self to act in accordance with their ‘personal contract’ with the world. Through early socialization experiences, individuals learn (and ultimately commit to) the importance of delaying gratification to obtain more prized outcomes in the long run, and that society values and rewards the time and hard work that is subsequently invested to obtain these outcomes (see Hafer & Rubel, 2015). Principles of deservingness therefore provide the foundations for the personal contract: We get what we deserve and we deserve what we get; good things happen to good people, bad things happen to bad people. Extrapolated to transgressions, to the extent that victims believe the world generally treats them decently and reasonably, they must act accordingly, even when transgressed against (Strelan & Sutton, 2011).

Third, individuals who believe the world treats them fairly by definition have a generally positive perception of humanity. This positive other-orientation empowers victims to forego short-term goals (such as retaliating) and instead confidently invest in the future by responding constructively, with the expectation that they will be appropriately rewarded for their actions downstream (Dalbert, 2002). Forgiveness, meanwhile, is an approach-oriented response that often functions to maintain valued relationships (for a review, see McCullough, 2008). As such, forgiveness as an interpersonal phenomenon provides a useful future-oriented prosocial strategy for helping victims defend against threats to their BJW-self framework.

1.3. BJW-other and forgiveness

Because individuals abide by a personal contract with the world, they therefore expect that others also have a personal contract. Thus, when others transgress, observers – particularly victims – perceive transgressors as having acted in contravention of the personal contract. Accordingly, transgressors do not deserve positive responding. If anything, they should be punished and/or marginalized. Such negative responding helps restore a just world for others, insofar as there is

now a congruency between action and outcome (i.e., bad behavior results in negative consequences).

H1. BJW-self will be associated with forgiveness whereas BJW-other will be associated with negative responding.

1.4. ITRs and forgiveness

ITRs reflect beliefs and expectations about how romantic relationships should function (Knee et al., 2003). They are characterized by two independent sets of beliefs, one concerned with romantic destiny, the other with relationship growth. While individuals can hold each belief to a varying degree (Knee et al., 2003), for purposes of clarity, hereafter a destiny theorist refers to an individual who holds stronger destiny beliefs relative to growth beliefs; the opposite applies for growth theorists.

Destiny theorists believe that a potential relationship partner is either compatible or not (Knee et al., 2003). A defining feature of destiny beliefs is that they reflect a view that personalities are fixed (hence the all or nothing attitude towards relationships). Destiny theorists therefore tend to make internal, stable, and global attributions for others’ behavior (Knee et al., 2003). When a destiny theorist is transgressed against – particularly early on in a relationship – the transgressor is less likely to be given the benefit of the doubt; the behavior is less likely to be accepted as a one-off; and it is perceived as communicating something fundamentally negative about the transgressor’s disposition. Accordingly, destiny theorists tend to react negatively when transgressed against (for a brief review, see Chen, DeWall, Poon, & Chen, 2012). Saliently for the present research, they are less likely to forgive under certain conditions (Finkel, Burnette, & Scissors, 2007).

Conversely, growth theorists tend to believe that personal attributes are malleable and can change. Thus, growth theorists are concerned not with diagnosing partner fit but with cultivating and developing and ultimately maintaining relationships. Growth theorists take the view that relationships can benefit from the effortful resolution of challenges and obstacles, and therefore see conflict not as a problem but as an opportunity to build the relationship and ultimately grow closer together (Knee et al., 2003). Further, growth theorists may derive satisfaction from the self-sacrificial and accommodative responses that are required for effective resolution of conflict (Cobb, DeWall, Lambert, & Fincham, 2013). As such, growth theorists are more likely to respond in an approach-oriented manner when confronted by a transgression, including being less likely to act aggressively (Chen et al., 2012) and perpetuate violence on a close other (Cobb et al., 2013) and, importantly, more likely to forgive (Finkel et al., 2007).

H2. Growth beliefs will be associated with forgiveness whereas destiny beliefs will be associated with negative responding.

1.5. The mediating role of ITRs in the relations between BJW and forgiveness

BJW-self and growth beliefs share several conceptual similarities. Each reflects a positive perception of humanity, mandates a constructive rather than destructive resolution of transgressions, and encourages investment in and commitment to longer-term prosocial goals. Thus, we propose that BJW-self is positively associated with forgiveness because aggrieved partners with strong BJW-self are also likely to be growth theorists. Transgressions threaten the existence of a just world; victims can defend against the threat by reframing the transgression as an opportunity for growth in a relationship. By taking on a growth perspective, victims with strong BJW-self are able to respond adaptively and act according to the personal contract – that is, pursue a future-oriented goal of restored relationship harmony – by forgiving.

BJW-other and destiny beliefs are also conceptually compatible. First, each, by necessity, promotes a negative attributional style. Second,

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