



# Catching the liar as a matter of justice: Effects of belief in a just world on deception detection accuracy and the moderating role of mortality salience



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## ABSTRACT

Belief in a just world has been linked to high interpersonal trust and less suspicion of deception. We therefore predicted people with a strong dispositional belief in a just world to have low motivation to accurately detect deception. Accordingly, we hypothesized such a belief to be negatively related to accuracy in deception detection. Furthermore, research on Terror Management Theory has indicated that culturally shared values, such as justice, become more important after mortality salience. Thus, we assumed engaging in justice concerns after a death threat is especially relevant for people with a strong belief in a just world, and further, that accurate deception detection is a matter of justice. Based on this reasoning, we expected people with a strong belief in a just world to have an increased motivation to accurately detect deception after mortality salience. Consequently, we hypothesized dispositional differences in belief in a just world to be unrelated to accuracy in deception detection after mortality salience. In line with these predictions, our study revealed that participants with a strong (vs. weak) belief in a just world were worse in deception detection unless they had first been reminded of their mortality.

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## 1. Introduction

A great deal of research has been dedicated to Lerner's (1980) Just-World Theory (JWT) and dispositional Belief in Just World (BJW; for a review, see Hafer & Bègue, 2005). Given that BJW affects people's interpersonal attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Bègue & Muller, 2006), it seems surprising that investigating the effects of BJW on deception detection has thus far been neglected—especially because in a just world, liars will be detected as liars and truth tellers will be trusted. Moreover, although JWT has been linked to Terror Management Theory (TMT; e.g., Hirschberger, 2006), to our knowledge, no empirical work to date has directly addressed the issue of how a dispositional BJW relates to the effects of the threat of death. Addressing this, the current paper investigates the interplay of dispositional BJW and mortality salience (MS) regarding accurate detection of deceptive behavior.

### 1.1. Belief in a just world and striving for justice

Originally, Lerner (1965, 1980) developed the JWT to address the issue of people's reactions to injustice, proposing that people possess a belief that the world is a just place where people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (so called BJW). According to Lerner, such a belief is rooted in the psychological need to perceive the world as stable and orderly. Given this fundamental need, people defend their BJW when this belief is threatened by injustices, leading to various reactions, with the aim to re-establish the perceived justice. JWT was first empirically investigated by a study by Lerner and Simmons (1966), addressing the case of evaluating an innocent victim who received electric shocks through little fault of her own. Results revealed that participants compensated the victim when they were given the opportunity to do so. However, when there was no such opportunity and participants were given the information that the victim's suffering would continue, the victim was derogated. The authors explained both reactions (compensation and derogation) with an increased motivation to re-establish perceived justice. In the case of victim derogation, participants re-evaluated the situation according to their BJW, that is, the victim was perceived as responsible for her own situation and deserved to suffer because of her blameworthy

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character (so called secondary victimization). To a large extent, research on JWT referred to this experimental innocent victim paradigm, supporting the notion that threats to BJW increase people's motivation to regain perceived justice in order to protect the belief that the world is a just place (Dalbert, 2009; Hafer & Bègue, 2005).

Beyond situational differences, since the 1970s, JWT research has also addressed dispositional differences in BJW (for a review, see Dalbert, 2009; Furnham, 2003). Dispositional BJW was, for example, found to be positively related to religiosity (e.g., Dalbert & Katona-Sallay, 1996), authoritarianism, and internal locus of control (for review, see Furnham & Procter, 1989). Moreover, evidence supports the idea of a positive relationship between a strong BJW and subjective well-being and positive mood (e.g., Dalbert, 2002). In line with the assumption that a strong BJW implies the belief of being treated fairly and honestly by others, BJW was also evidenced to be positively correlated to 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). Specifically, in three experiments, Zuckerman and Gerbasi (1977) indicated a strong BJW to be associated with less suspicion toward possible deception.

Many just-world researchers have assumed that dispositional differences in BJW indicate differences in the underlying need to perceive the world as just (Hafer & Bègue, 2005, p. 131). Perceived injustice therefore constitutes a greater threat to people with a strong dispositional BJW. Thus, threatening the BJW is suggested to increase the motivation to strive for justice, especially among people with a strong dispositional BJW (see also Dalbert, 2009, p. 12). In line with this reasoning, numerous studies across a wide range of victimizing situations (e.g., rape, cancer, AIDS, poverty, obesity, skin color, driving accidents, unemployment) found that observers with a strong dispositional BJW showed more secondary victimization compared to observers with a weak BJW (for a review, see Montada & Lerner, 1998). Moreover, Dalbert (1999) found support for the idea that one's own unjust behavior decreases self-esteem for people with a strong BJW.

Overall, BJW has a protective function by providing an orderly, stable world. In line with this argument, a strong dispositional BJW was shown to relate to positive mood, high interpersonal trust, and less suspicion of deception. Additionally, there is convincing evidence for the idea that after a just-world threat, people with a strong BJW have more concerns about matters of justice.

### 1.2. Motivation and deception detection accuracy

Although lying has always been an important social issue (Ekman, 1992), people's ability to discriminate accurately between lies and truths is not particularly well developed. In a comprehensive meta-analysis of more than 200 studies, Bond and DePaulo (2006) found that people without special training were slightly better than the chance result of a coin toss (54%) when judging the veracity of actual true or deceptive statements (for similar results, see Hartwig & Bond, 2011). Two factors are likely affecting these low accuracy rates. On the one hand, senders leak few actual cues of deception (Hartwig & Bond, 2011); on the other hand, many cues (especially nonverbal) that laypeople consider relevant are of little diagnostic value (e.g., DePaulo et al., 2003; Global Deception Research Team, 2006; O'Sullivan, 2003).

Other lay beliefs pertain to the content of deceptive statements. Laypersons assume that deceptive statements are characterized by less logical consistency, more superfluous and fewer relevant details, and more spontaneous corrections (Global Deception Research Team, 2006). Empirically, these content-related cues are more diagnostic of actual deception (DePaulo et al., 2003). By referring to dual process models of persuasion highlighting the role

of motivation and resources in message processing (e.g., Chen & Chaiken, 1999), recent research on deception detection found that high accuracy motivation and high processing resources foster systematic attention to the content of the message (cf. Forrest & Feldman, 2000). Consequently, high motivation to accurately detect deception (e.g., negative mood, high need for cognition) was shown to lead to higher discrimination accuracy between truthful and deceptive messages (e.g., Reinhard, 2010; Reinhard & Schwarz, 2012). Reinhard (2010), for example, assessed participants' need for cognition, a well-established individual difference variable that captures individuals' tendency to think carefully about new information. As predicted, participants high in need for cognition used both nonverbal and verbal cues for their veracity judgments, whereas participants low in need for cognition used only nonverbal information. Reflecting the differential diagnosticity of these inputs, high need for cognition participants achieved higher classification accuracy for truthful as well as deceptive messages. We now address the question of why BJW might play a crucial role in people's motivation in deception detection.

### 1.3. Belief in a just world and deception detection

Introducing the field of BJW to findings of lie detection research, we assume that if there is no reason to engage in re-establishing a BJW, people with a strong (compared to a weak) BJW are less motivated in deception detection. We mainly build this prediction on the above-cited findings, indicating that a strong BJW is linked to positive mood, high interpersonal trust, and less suspicion of deception (Bègue, 2002; Dalbert, 2002; Zuckerman & Gerbasi, 1977). Related to that, people with a strong BJW rely on the belief that good things happen to good people and that bad things happen to bad people. In other words, one might say that liars get what they deserve anyway. We interpret this belief as a cognitive heuristic that is used by default when there is no reason to re-establish perceived justice, implying lower motivation in detecting deception. Based on findings emphasizing the role of high motivation for improving deception detection accuracy (e.g., Reinhard, 2010), we hypothesize that a stronger BJW is linked to worse detection accuracy of deceptive messages. However, in the next step, we consider that if there is motivational reason to engage in justice, detection accuracy will improve because accurately distinguishing between liars and truth tellers represents a matter of justice (e.g., DePaulo & Rosenthal, 1979; Fiske, 1992; see also O'Sullivan, 2003, p. 1317).

### 1.4. Increasing concerns about justice: Death and the shelter of cultural worldviews

Terror Management Theory (TMT) suggests an ubiquitous need for meaning and self-esteem due to efforts to secure oneself psychologically from the threatening awareness of mortality (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). According to TMT, the fear of death can be diminished by engaging in cultural worldviews. Based on this reasoning, a vast amount of research (more than 250 studies; for meta-analysis, see Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010) supports the MS hypothesis that reminding people of their own death increases the motivation to defend one's worldview by derogating worldview-threatening others (e.g., Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989), and to strive for self-esteem by living up to important cultural norms and values (e.g., Jonas et al., 2008; Schindler, Reinhard, & Stahlberg, 2013).

In a review article, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon (1997) related TMT to JWT, concluding that the terror management perspective on the function of a BJW is highly compatible to Lerner's (1980) perspective of assuming BJW has a protective function. In four studies, Hirschberger (2006) found direct evidence for this idea: Assuming BJW to constitute an important component of the

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