

The Janus-faced justice motive: Consequences of BJW for self and others

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The history of just world research is now more than forty years old and still shows continuously increasing publication rates. In these forty years, two clearly different phases can be distinguished.

Phase 1:

Up to the end of the nineteen-eighties studies predominantly concentrated on the effects of just world beliefs (BJW) for victims of injustice, misfortune or failure. These studies portrayed BJW as an anti-social trait which makes people prone to disdain their fellow men, to exclude minorities, to devalue innocent victims and to pursue them with blame and reproach.

Phase 2:

Since more than ten years a distinctive change can be observed: From now on, studies concentrate on the positive functions of BJW. These more recent studies present BJW as a personal resource which subserves people in manifold ways in everyday life: It allows individuals to invest time and energy in long-term goals and future-oriented activities, it facilitates the development of trust in other people and it provides a conceptual framework which helps to find meaning in the events of life.

Different valuations of the Just-world-phenomenon

These different findings involve rather different explicit and implicit valuations of the just world phenomenon. While it seemed reasonable in the first phase to view BJW in a negative light, to advise against it and to restrain its detrimental effects, the phenomenon is judged much more positively in recent years, its benefits are highlighted, and its promotion is considered.

Different variables assessed in the two phases

Among the variables assessed in phase 1 are usually just world scales and scales for the evaluation of victims (character, behaviour, fault). Among the variables assessed in phase 2 are usually just world scales and several indicators of well-being, motivation and optimism.

Present purpose

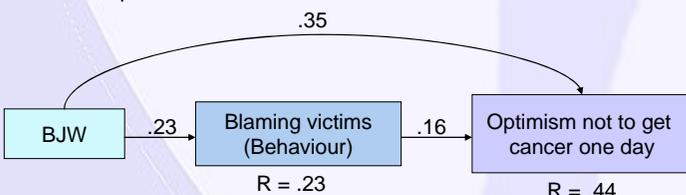
We suppose that the effects observed in phase 1 and 2 are two sides of the same medal and want to illustrate this with data from three studies including the formerly used variables as well as the more recently considered variables.

Study 1: Cancer study

Questionnaire study, N = 326

Variables assessed among others: General Belief in a just world (Dalbert, Montada & Schmitt, 1987; for an English version see Dalbert & Yamauchi, 1994), Blaming victims' behaviour, optimism concerning the possibility of getting cancer oneself one day. Alpha for all scales > .72

R = .44 for optimism

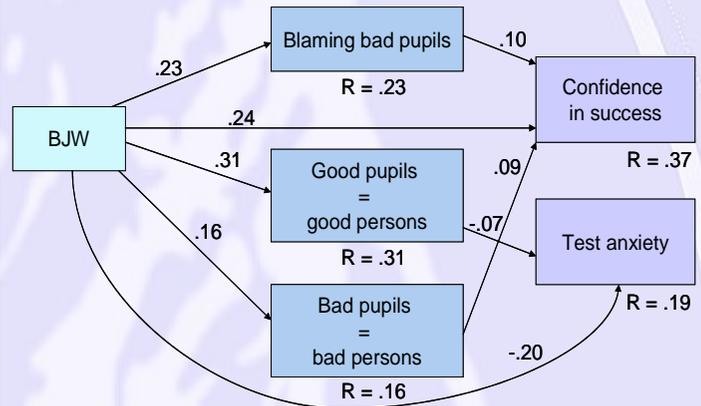


Study 2: School study

Questionnaire study, N = 1274 pupils from schools in Rhineland-Palatinate (age range: 11-19)

Variables assessed among others: School-specific just world scale, blaming other pupils for failure, convictions that successful pupils are good persons and unsuccessful pupils are bad persons, confidence in one's own success, and test anxiety. Alpha for all scales > .79

R = .37 for confidence in success, R = .19 for test anxiety

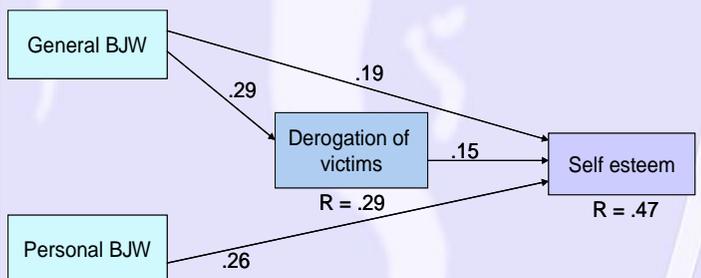


Study 3: General resource study

N = 163, heterogeneous sample

Variables assessed among others: General Belief in a Just World (Dalbert, Montada & Schmitt, 1987), Personal Belief in a Just World (Dalbert, 1999), Aggregated Scale for Victim Blame (blaming unemployed people, cancer victims, traffic accident victims, unsuccessful students for their fate), Self esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Alpha for all scales > .71

R = .47 for self esteem



Conclusion

Studies in which consequences for self and others were considered simultaneously show that both might be true: BJW fosters personal well-being but often also by derogating others.

The originally observed rather detrimental effects of BJW should not be forgotten when looking at the more recently found rather positively connoted effects. Both might be two sides of the same medal: It is just because BJW has so manifold positive functions and can be used as a personal resource that individuals are so reluctant to give it up only because of contradicting evidence in everyday life. We should therefore look for ways how people can profit from their BJW without harming others.

References

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