Chapter 2

Immanent Justice and Ultimate Justice

TWO WAYS OF BELIEVING IN JUSTICE

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1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. Belief in a Just World: Experimental and Survey Studies

In a series of sophisticated experiments beginning in 1965, Melvin Lerner was able to demonstrate impressively how beliefs regarding justice can alter human reactions toward the innocent victims of misfortune—instead of sympathizing and helping the victim, subjects can be made to belittle his plight and even scorn him (for a summary, see Lerner, 1970; Lerner, Miller & Holmes, 1976). According to Lerner's theory of just-world motivation, people assume that they live in a just world, in which each person gets what he deserves and deserves what he gets. Should a person witness clear injustice, this (potentially vital) belief in the justice of the world becomes threatened. Thus, people are motivated to maintain or reaffirm their belief in a just world, perhaps through personal or active engagement in the preservation of justice. Because the latter may often prove costly (if not impossible), people attempt to maintain their belief

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in a just world by simply ignoring injustice or reinterpreting the results of events such that the consequences appear to be just. If, for example, the victim himself has contributed to his misfortune, or appears to be a bad person, one might argue that he doesn’t deserve any better; in this manner, an incident of obvious injustice might paradoxically become evidence supporting a just world, and thus validate the observer’s belief system. In his theoretical analyses of the topic, however, Melvin Lerner (1980) expressly points out that the devaluation of innocent victims is not the only strategy by which belief in a just world is preserved. Other strategies include the construction of many different worlds, of which only one—the one most relevant for the observer—must be just, or the assumption of various time perspectives.

The just world hypothesis was developed within experimental social psychology and originates in laboratory research. In order to investigate the essential assumptions of his theory, Lerner constructed experimental situations with various degrees of (in)justice. Virtually all of his experiments produced the same main result: The more unjust a situation appeared, the greater the devaluation of the innocent victim involved. Lerner traced the variance in victim-devaluation (the dependent variable in these experiments) back to his subjects’ need to believe that there is justice in the world. In these experiments, Lerner did not assess the decisive motive, belief in a just world, directly; rather, he deduced the presence of this motivation indirectly through alterations in subjects’ behavior across different combinations of experimental conditions.

It is not unusual for a phenomenon discovered by experimental research to be considered as personality construct later on (Furnham, 1990). Do all people react similarly, or are some people more prone to show the phenomenon? Furnham (1990) demonstrated how the development of personality constructs follows a typical sequence which can be described in eight stages. According to this sequence a phenomenon is discovered by experimental research (stage 1), replicated and tested for its robustness and generalizability (stage 2), until then an unidimensional self-report measure is developed on the third stage. A similar pattern can be observed in the development of just world research: Almost a decade after Lerner’s first publication on this topic (Lerner, 1965), a questionnaire designed to measure belief in a just world as an interindividual trait was constructed by Rubin & Peplau (1973, 1975). An opportunity for validating the questionnaire occurred in 1971 during the “National Draft Lottery,” which was used to select soldiers for deployment in Vietnam from among 20-year-old students in the United States. The results showed a tendency for those with high scores on the belief in a just world scale to conceive random outcomes as intended and to portray draftees as having deserved selection. Further experiments (see, e.g., Zuckerman et al., 1975; Miller, 1977) confirmed the