

# How Do Observers of Victimization Preserve Their Belief in a Just World Cognitively or Actionally?

*FINDINGS FROM A LONGITUDINAL STUDY*

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## 1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Individuals have a need to believe that they live in a world where people generally get what they deserve. The belief that the world is just enables the individual to confront his physical and social environment as though they were stable and orderly. Without such a belief it would be difficult for the individual to commit himself to the pursuit of long-range goals or even to the socially regulated behavior of day-to-day life. Since the belief that the world is just serves such an important adaptive function for the individual, people are very reluctant to give up this belief, and they can be greatly troubled if they encounter evidence that suggest that the world is not really just or orderly after all" (Lerner & Miller, 1978, pp. 1030–1031).

It is assumed that the justice motive leads the person who observes an injustice to attempt to restore justice. The restoration of justice can be accomplished in different ways: One can compensate the victim or one can

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persuade oneself that the victim deserves to suffer because of a bad character or because of engaging in bad acts (e.g. Lerner, 1970, 1975, 1980; Lerner & Miller, 1978). Although not stated explicitly, Lerner seems to assume that the Belief in a Just World is universal (see also Furnham in this volume). Universality is not incompatible with the existence of interindividual differences in strength nor is it incompatible with intraindividual variation depending upon characteristics of the victim and characteristics of the situation. Rubin and Peplau (1973) were the first researchers to publish a self-report measure that assumed to assess Belief in a Just World as a trait-like, generalized, and stable interindividually varying world view (for a summary, see Furnham & Procter, 1989).

Conceptualizing Belief in a Just World as a motivational disposition to view the world, with interindividual as well as intraindividual variation, allows the specification of the basic hypothesis: The stronger a person's Belief in a Just World, the more threatening observed or experienced injustices will be, and consequently, the stronger a person's motivation to defend his or her Belief in a Just World either by attempts to restore justice or by attempts to deny injustice by appropriate (re)appraisals of the case.

We tested this hypothesis in a study where relatively well suited subjects (well suited in terms of living conditions, social security, education) were confronted with problems and needs of less fortunate persons: the poor living in developing countries, Turkish guest workers in Germany, and the unemployed. The problems and needs of these people were vividly described in scenarios that left to varying views about deservedness and (in)justices open, therefore allowing interindividually varying responses.

In this study, we assessed not only the interindividual variation of Belief in a Just World but the domain specificity of Belief in a Just World as well. When asked about justice in the world, subjects may think of more or less specific sections of the world. Some may think of their own worlds (their family, their neighborhood, their country) or of one of these. Others may think of broader sections of the world. We do not know what subjects are focusing on when they are asked unless we specify the section of the world in question which we chose to do in this study. A scale to measure the general, unspecified Belief in a Just World (GBJW) was used and, in addition, three specific scales (SPBJW) for assessing the respondents' views about the (1) justice of developing countries in the so-called Third World, (2) justice concerns of the unemployed in Germany, and (3) justice concerns of Turkish migrant workers in Germany.

The longitudinal study was designed with two waves of assessment to obtain information about the stability and change of BJW as well as information about predictors of stability and change. Thus, we were able