Belief in a Just World, Well-Being, and Coping with an Unjust Fate

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People ordinarily operate on the basis of unquestioned assumptions about the self, the world and the future. These cognitive schemata describe the benign world or optimism about the future, the meaningful world and the self as worthy (cf., Epstein, 1990; Janoff-Bulman, 1979; Weinstein, 1980). They do not comprise exact descriptions of reality but rather positive misperceptions; therefore they are named by Taylor (e.g., 1989) as positive illusions. Taylor and Brown (1988) showed that this kind of illusions seems to be adaptive for mental health and well-being.

In my opinion one important positive illusion indicating the belief in a meaningful world is the belief in a just world (cf., Lerner, 1965). The just world hypothesis states that people are motivated to believe that they live in a world where people generally get what they deserve. The just world belief indicates the interindividually varying strength of this justice motive, which enables people to confront their physical and social environment as though it were stable and orderly (cf., Lerner & Miller, 1987).

My research was guided by the assumption that this justice motive is central for human development in several ways:

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1. It influences the reconstruction and perception of one's life course. Injustices and discriminations will be denied more strongly in one's own group than in other groups (e.g., Dalbert & Yamauchi, 1994; Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990); and one tends to believe more strongly in a personal than in a general just world (cf., Dalbert & Lerner, in prep; Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, in press); and the belief to be fairly treated in one's childhood is even stronger (Dalbert & Goch, 1995).

2. The justice motive guides social interactions. In situations with broad social and political unfairness just world belief fosters the denial of the observed injustice (cf., for an review, Furnham and Procter, 1989). But when confronted with specific prosocial situations, in which substantial help is possible, just world belief and prosocial commitment are positively related. For example, subjects helping an accident victim more strongly believed in a just world than non-helpers (cf., Bierhoff, Klein, & Kramp, 1991). Finally, just world belief leads one to expect a good fate as reward for one's own good actions (cf., Zuckerman, 1975).

3. The belief in a world which is stable and just enables people to cope more easily with their daily hassles. For instance, Ritter, Benson, and Snyder (1990) reported a negative relationship between just world belief and depressive symptoms for a representative sample of adults from Northern Ireland. Direct evidence for this positive impact of just world belief on coping with day-to-day stress was recently given by an experiment of Tomaka and Blascovich (1994). When confronted with a potentially stressful laboratory task just world belief served as a stress buffer. Subjects high in just world belief compared to those low in just world belief appraised the task more as challenge, rated the task as less stressful post hoc, outperformed subjects low in just world belief and differed in their physiological reactions (cf., Tomaka & Blascovich, 1994).

4. First evidence that just world belief is as well adaptive for victims of an unjust fate can be found by Bulman and Wortman (1977): Severe accident victims were happier the more they believed in a just world. Recently, Lerner and Somers (1992) showed that workers anticipating plant closure showed a better well-being the better their personal beliefs were; just world belief was part of the personal belief construct. On the contrary for a sample of burn patients Kiecolt-Glaser and Williams (1987) found no relationship between just world belief and different indicators of psychological adjustment.