

# Justice for all, or just for me? More evidence of the importance of the self-other distinction in just-world beliefs

Author links open overlay panelRobbie M. Sutton, Karen M. Douglas

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## Abstract

Recent research shows that the belief that the world is fair to the self (BJW-self) is associated with indices of psychological health, whereas the belief that the world is fair to others (BJW-others) is associated with harsh social attitudes (Bègue and Bastounis, 2003). However research has not ruled out the possibility that third factors are responsible for these patterns of correlation. In the present research, 233 psychology undergraduates completed measures of BJW-self, BJW-others, attitudes to the poor, life satisfaction, locus of control, self esteem, and socially desirable responding. Results showed that BJW-self is uniquely related to psychological health, BJW-others is uniquely related to harsh attitudes to the poor, and that these relationships are not attributable to the influence of third causes. Results provide strong support for the distinction between perceived justice for the self and for others, and suggest that perceptions of justice are indeed the “active ingredient” responsible for their ability to predict psychological and social outcomes.

## Introduction

According to Lerner's (1980) *just-world* theory, people who believe that the world treats them fairly may plan confidently for their future, expecting their lives to be orderly, meaningful, and controllable. In turn this expectation promotes mental health, meaning that the belief in a just world (BJW) can be seen as a “positive illusion” (Taylor &

Brown, 1988). Indeed research links it to many indices of subjective well being (SWB), including positive affect (Dalbert, 1998), optimism (Littrell & Beck, 1999), effective coping with stress (Tomaka & Blascovitch, 1994), better sleep (Jensen, Dehlin, Hagberg, Samuelsson, & Svensson, 1998), low levels of depression (Ritter, Benson, & Snyder, 1990), and less loneliness (Jones, Freemon, & Goswick, 1981).

However, BJW is a double-edged sword according to this theory, because its psychological benefits motivate individuals to defend it against contradictory evidence, thereby minimising the injustices they see happening to others. Where possible, observers may do this by actively helping victims (e.g., Zuckerman, 1975), but where not, individuals may adopt cognitive strategies such as blame and derogation to minimise the *apparent* injustice being suffered (Lerner & Miller, 1978). Empirically, a strong BJW predicts prejudiced attitudes to a range of disadvantaged groups, including refugees (Montada, 1998), persons with AIDS (Connors & Heaven, 1990), the unemployed (Reichle, Schneider, & Montada, 1998), the elderly (Lipkus & Siegler, 1993), and the poor (Furnham & Gunter, 1984). With respect to its social corollaries, BJW can therefore be described as a largely “negative illusion” (Jost, 1995, p. 397).

Recent research adds texture to this picture by distinguishing different kinds of BJW (Furnham, 2003). Crucially, Lipkus, Dalbert, and Siegler (1996) distinguished the belief that the world is fair to others (BJW-others), from the belief that it is fair to the self (BJW-self). Lipkus et al. measured BJW-self and BJW-others with 16 closely matched items (e.g., “I feel that I get what I deserve” and “I feel that people get what they deserve”). Each eight-item scale was highly internally consistent but the correlation between the two was surprisingly modest. Scores on the BJW-self scale are also much higher than BJW-others (Bègue, 2002, Bègue and Bastounis, 2003).

Underscoring this distinction, BJW-self and BJW-others have different correlates. Lipkus et al. (1996) found BJW-self, but not BJW-others, to be related to indices of SWB such as positive affect, life-satisfaction, and low stress levels. Similarly, BJW-self, but not BJW-others, has been found to be related to life satisfaction (Dalbert, 1999), low scores on depression inventories (Dzuka & Dalbert, 2002), and

greater purpose in life (Bègue & Bastounis, 2003). Conversely, BJW-others, but not BJW-self, is associated with social outcomes such as prejudice toward the elderly and the poor (Bègue & Bastounis, 2003), and Americans' desire for revenge after the September 11 attacks (Kaiser, Vick, & Major, 2004).

If we can accept these findings at face value, they have radical implications for just-world theory. BJW should no longer be regarded as a singular construct: instead there appear to be two largely orthogonal types of BJW, one (BJW-self) relating to mental health, and the other (BJW-others) to harsh social attitudes. In principle, it therefore may be possible for individuals to accrue the mental health benefits of BJW without incurring their social costs. However, before we can accept these conclusions it is necessary to address an important limitation of the research. Generally, few studies have shown that BJW predicts psychological or social outcomes independently of the influence of third causes (Furnham, 2003, Lerner, 1980). Fewer still do the same with respect to BJW-self versus BJW-others. Therefore we cannot rule out the possibility that BJW-self plays no causal role in subjective well being and that its ability to predict SWB is merely an artifact of its correlation with other causal factors. A similar interpretive problem applies to the apparent role played by BJW-others in contributing to harsh social attitudes.

In this article our major aim is to examine the ability of BJW-self and BJW-others to predict criterion variables once key third causes have been controlled for. In so doing, we aim to validate BJW-self and BJW-others as distinct constructs that predict outcome variables in their own right. The particular third causes at issue in this article are locus of control (LOC), socially desirable responding (SDR), and self-esteem (SE). All of these factors, like BJW, are associated with outwardly positive beliefs about the self, the world, and/or personal control over life events.

More specifically, each variable might be responsible for the observed correlations between the two types of BJW and outcome variables. LOC, like BJW, refers to a contingency between individuals' actions and the events in their lives (Hafer, 2000, Lerner, 1980). It is strongly

associated with global measures of BJW (Furnham, 2003), SWB (Clarke, 2004), and blaming of the unfortunate (e.g., Duckitt, 1984). SDR, or the extent to which people provide socially desirable rather than totally candid survey responses, may affect responses to BJW scales (Dzuka & Dalbert, 2002; Furnham, 2003). It also appears to inflate reports of psychological well-being (e.g., Sutton & Farrall, 2005), and attenuate the expression of prejudice (McConahay, 1986). SE is linked theoretically and empirically to BJW, and is likely to be associated with BJW-*self* in particular (Dalbert, 1999). Indeed associations between BJW-*self* and measures of SWB may arise simply because they share an underlying positivity about the self (cf. Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2002). By controlling for self-esteem we can rule out this possibility.

To examine the discriminant and incremental validity of BJW-*self* and BJW-*others*, we administered measures of these constructs as well as LOC, SDR, and SE. We also administered a scale of life satisfaction as an index of SWB, because it has been shown to be related to BJW-*self* independently of the Big Five (Lipkus et al., 1996). We administered a scale of attitudes to the poor as our index of social attitudes, because it has been shown to be related to global BJW (Furnham & Gunter, 1984) and BJW-*others* (Bègue & Bastounis, 2003).

In line with findings reported elsewhere, we expected that our participants would perceive that the world is more just to themselves than to others generally (Lipkus et al., 1996). Such a result would support the theoretical claim that people are especially motivated to believe that the world is just to *themselves*, à la the personal contract (Lerner, 1980). Similarly, we predicted that BJW-*self* but not BJW-*others* would predict higher life satisfaction (Lipkus et al., 1996), and conversely that BJW-*others* but not BJW-*self* would predict harsher attitudes to the poor. Crucially, we expected these relationships between BJW-*self*, BJW-*others* and criterion variables to hold after the third causes LOC, SDR, and SE were statistically controlled for. These results would establish whether perceptions of *justice* for the self and others are really the “active ingredient” in the BJW-*self* and BJW-*others* scales. If they are, our results would support the theory that justice beliefs are psychologically fundamental (Lerner, 1980), as

well as the specific self-other distinction in just-world theory (Lipkus et al., 1996).