



# Belief in a just world mediates the relationship between institutional trust and life satisfaction among the elderly in China



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between institutional trust and life satisfaction, and the mediating role of belief in a just world (BJW) among the elderly. The General Belief in a Just World Scale (GBJW) and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) were employed. A self-developed Institutional Trust questionnaire was used to measure participant' levels of trust in eight institutions. The aggregate score for all eight items represented the level of institutional trust. The questionnaires were completed by 19,352 retirees ranging in age from 50 to 99 ( $M = 69.7$ ,  $SD = 8.0$ ). The results showed the following: (1) overall, the retirees tended to report high institutional trust and high life satisfaction; (2) institutional trust was positively associated with life satisfaction; and (3) more importantly, the relationships between institutional trust and life satisfaction were partially mediated by GBJW. This finding provides a new insight into the psychological mechanisms by which institutional trust relates to individual happiness. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings, as well as the study's limitations, are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, a burgeoning empirical studies have linked social trust to a variety of psychological health outcomes and happiness (Bjørnskov, 2006; Helliwell, 2006; Tokuda, Fujii, & Inoguchi, 2010). However, extant literature on this issue is characterized by several challenges. First, the mechanisms by which trust relates to or influences happiness remain further exploration (Tokuda et al., 2010; Yip et al., 2007). By reviewing relevant literature, we infer that social belief, such as belief in a just world (BJW), may mediate the relationship between social trust and life satisfaction. Second, social trust, as one of the three components of social capital, is a multidimensional concept. Paldam (2000) claimed that social trust includes generalized trust (trusting in unspecific people) and special trust (trust in known people or particular institutions). Recent studies distinguish the two types of social trust (Leung, Kier, Fung, Fung, & Sproule, 2011; Tan & Tambyah, 2011). Leung et al. (2011) found that both generalized interpersonal trust and institutional trust are independently associated with happiness, but there were positive but weak correlation between the two types of trusts. Relatively few studies have referred to the

relationship between institutional trust and happiness. Thus, in the current study, we focus on trust in institutions.

Third, the data underlying the trust–happiness assumption remain mainly derived from samples from developed Western nations, and relevant evidence from other areas, such as China, the largest developing country in the world, is relatively sparse. In the current study, we chose old adults living in Chinese cities as participants. China has a special social and cultural background against which the mechanisms underlying the interaction between trust and happiness can be explored (Li & Liang, 2007). First, with improvement of the living standards, older adults are placing more importance on a healthy and high-quality later life. Additionally, social conflicts and negative outcomes with economic development, such as the widening gap between the rich and the poor, unfair wealth distribution, and official corruption, could result in the decrease of social trust, especially trust in institutions, which would counteract the positive effects of economic development on happiness. A recent survey on the social mentality of China indicated that there is some distrust in public institutions (Rao, Zhou, Tian, & Yang, 2013). Second, with the degeneration of physical, psychological, and social functioning, older adults tend to rely more on intimate relationships, social networks, and public institutions. Thus, trustworthiness and credibility of public institutions perhaps influences their evaluations or attitudes toward society, further affecting life satisfaction.

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### 1.1. Potential mediating role of BJW between trust and happiness

The concept of “belief in a just world” formulated by Lerner and Miller (1978) states that people tend to believe that they live in a just world, in which everyone gets what they deserve, and physical and social environments around them are stable and orderly. In the current study, BJW was considered a mediating factor of the trust happiness relationship. The reasons are as follows.

First, previous studies have suggested that BJW is associated with both trust and happiness. BJW serves as a conceptual framework that helps individuals understand or interpret life events in a meaningful way and maintain their happiness (Dalbert, 2001). Many empirical studies have demonstrated the role of BJW in enhancing happiness (Correia & Vala, 2004; Dzuka & Dalbert, 2006; Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996). Using longitudinal data, Lai, Bond, and Hui (2007) found that a negative attitude toward society and human nature would result in less social engagement and more negative social feedback, which further results in lower satisfaction with life. Correia, Batistaa, and Lima (2009) confirmed the existence of a mutually reinforcing association between life satisfaction and BJW. However, a few extant studies indicate a positive relationship between trust and BJW (Correia & Vala, 2004; Otto, Glaser, & Dalbert, 2009). Correia and Vala (2004) found a positive correlation between trust in societal institutions and BJW in a sample of young adults. Accordingly, we can infer that individuals with higher institutional trust often strongly believe that the world around them is just. Otto et al. (2009) observed a positive relationship between occupational trust and BJW. They assumed that BJW decreases over time after critical life events, such as unemployment, because it partly reflects reality and therefore incorporates unjust experiences.

Second, BJW is a relatively stable but not invariable trait (Dalbert, 1999; Furnham, 2003). BJW varies depending on the situations or social attitudes people experience (Schaafsma, 2013; Wu, Wang, Zhou, Wang, & Zhang, 2009). Schaafsma (2013) found that BJW fully mediated the negative relationship between perceived discrimination and well-being. He suggested that experiencing discrimination undermines just world belief, thereby having a negative effect on the well-being of members of ethnic minorities. Similarly, Liang and Borders (2012) found that belief in an unjust world mediates the association between perceived ethnic discrimination and psychological functioning. As Nudelman (2013) suggested, a safe and trusted environment is necessary for the development of BJW, and mistrust creates a sense that the world is unpredictable and unreliable, which could further reduce one's happiness.

Based on the above literature, we infer that BJW serves as a bridge linking institutional trust to life satisfaction. A high level of trust in public institutions leads to or enhances the belief that society and the world are just and fair, further increasing life satisfaction. Conversely, a low level of trust in public institutions leads to or enhances the belief that society and the world are unjust and unfair, further reducing life satisfaction.

### 1.2. Present study

Based on previous studies of the associations among institutional trust, social belief, and happiness, the current study aimed to determine (1) the relationship between institutional trust and life satisfaction, and (2) whether BJW mediates this relationship, after controlling for physical health, economic condition, and other socio-demographic variables. We hypothesized that (1) institutional trust would be positively and significantly associated with retirees' life satisfaction and, (2) BJW would fully or partially mediate the relationship between institutional trust and life satisfaction (e.g., the indirect effect via BJW would be significant).

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Participants

The sample was drawn from a research project on physical status, mental health, and ideology of retirees, which was funded by the Chinese Academy of Sciences. The project was conducted in 46 cities of 17 provincial-level administrative regions in Mainland China. The investigators were psychological researchers, sociological researchers, and well-trained workers of the local Bureau of Retired Personnel and local communities. As many as 25,000 questionnaires were hand out, and 22,019 questionnaires were completed. Data on trust were absent in five cities. Finally, valid sample consisted of 19,352 participants, with ages ranging from 50 to 99 years ( $M = 69.7$ ,  $SD = 8.0$ ). There were 14,250 men and 4828 women; 274 did not report their sex. The percentage of male participants (74.7%) exceeded that of females (25.3%); this ratio reflected differences in the actual sex structure of employment in China for the past several decades (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011). Table 1 shows detailed demographic and socioeconomic variables as well as missing data for each variable.

### 2.2. Instruments

#### 2.2.1. Institutional Trust questionnaire

In the present study, institutional trust referred to the level of trust in public institutions. Because of the absence of a universally approved instrument, the authors developed an 8-item Institutional Trust questionnaire based on interviews with retirees and previous studies (Habibov & Afandi, 2015; Hudson, 2006; Leung et al., 2011). Using a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = very distrustful to 5 = very trustful), the participants were asked to assess their trust level in the following institutions: central government;

**Table 1**  
Demographic characteristics of participants.

Variable	<i>n</i>	Valid %	Mean ( <i>SD</i> )
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	14,250	74.7	
Female	4828	25.3	
Missing	274		
<i>Age</i>			
50–59 years	1765	9.3	69.7 (8.0)
60–69 years	7785	40.9	
70–79 years	7038	37.0	
80 and older	2453	12.9	
Missing	311		
<i>Educational level</i>			
Elementary or lower	817	4.3	
Junior high school	3871	20.2	
Senior high school	7507	39.2	
Junior college or higher	6875	36.4	
Missing	182		
<i>Marital status</i>			
Widowed/unmarried/divorced/separated	1943	10.1	
Married	17,207	89.9	
Missing	202		
<i>Physical health</i>			
Very poor	322	1.7	
Poor	1619	8.4	
Fair	8735	45.4	
Good	6916	36.0	
Excellent	1637	8.5	
Missing	123		
<i>Monthly income (16 grades)</i>			
Valid	19,023		3461 (1472)
Missing	329		

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