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The prosocial, adaptive qualities of just world beliefs: Implications for the relationship between justice and forgiveness

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Abstract

The relationship between belief in a just world (BJW) and forgiveness was examined in 275 participants. Personal BJW was positively related, and unjust world beliefs negatively related, to forgiveness of others. Personal and general BJW were each positively related to self-forgiveness. Gratitude mediated the relationships between personal BJW and forgiveness of others, and unjust world beliefs and forgiveness of others. Self-esteem mediated the relationships between personal BJW and self-forgiveness, and general BJW and self-forgiveness. It appears that BJW reflects a general disposition to respond to transgressions in a prosocial and adaptive manner, suggesting that the relationship between justice and forgiveness may not be as incompatible as what a first glance suggests. That is, people who are motivated by a concern for justice may also be more likely to possess a forgiving disposition.

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1. Introduction

When we are transgressed against, we typically respond by seeking justice (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002). However, a robust literature indicates that people also embrace an alternative response: forgiveness (Strelan & Covic, 2006). Instead of retaliating or seeking punishment or compensation, people who forgive respond with benevolence and compassion; they wipe the slate clean and the offender is no longer in their debt. More specifically, forgiveness is characterised as the transformation from negative to positive responses towards a transgressor (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Thus, justice and forgiveness would appear to be competitive responses—yet each has been shown to be relevant whenever transgressions occur, be they in intimate relationships, the workplace, the justice system, or between cultural and religious groups (Strelan & Covic, 2006). At a theoretical level, we need to better understand the relationship between these two constructs. Doing so would help us better understand at an applied level how people respond to transgressions.

The aim of the present study was to attempt to find some common ground between these two apparently incompatible approaches. Some commonalities have already been suggested. Participants in an experimental study prompted to think about justice were found to be more forgiving (Karremans & Van Lange, 2005), and forgiveness has been related to social justice-type values (Schwartz, 1994) and restorative justice (Braithwaite, 1989). This article links justice and forgiveness at the level of individual differences by examining the relationship between belief in a just world (BJW) and dispositional forgiveness of others and the self. A second unique aspect of the study is that it incorporates a dispositional variable not normally associated with BJW, gratitude. In doing so, the study examines the extent to which gratitude and another individual difference variable, self-esteem, mediate the link between BJW and forgiveness of others and self.

Three operationalizations of just world beliefs are distinguished here: general, personal, and unjust (Dalbert, 1999; Loo, 2002). General BJW refers to one's beliefs about how people in general are treated. Personal BJW refer to perceptions of how an individual in particular feels he or she is treated. Unjust world beliefs refer to those individuals who believe that the world is generally unjust. BJW and unjust world beliefs appear to be separate dimensions. Whereas BJW reflects a world where the good are rewarded and the bad are punished, unjust world beliefs reflect a world where the innocent are punished, the deserving go unrewarded, and the guilty escape punishment.

People with BJW are motivated to believe in a world that is stable, orderly, and logical, one where good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people; we get what we deserve and we deserve what we get (Lerner, 1980). BJW therefore provides a conceptual framework for making sense of the world, and people with high BJW are motivated to defend against threats to the framework. A transgression is such a threat. How do people respond? When we observe others' misfortunes, particularly those whom we do not know or do not identify with, we tend to blame victims (Montada, 1998). When we are ourselves victims, responses are less clear. On one hand, people can react negatively to negative personal experiences. Victims of armed robbery, carjacking and stalking have reported more pessimistic views of the world after their experiences (Overcash, Calhoun, Cann, & Tedeschi, 1996). US college students with strong

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