

Belief in a just world: Perspectives, psychological approaches and research results

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Abstract. The paper presents briefly different perspectives: philosophical, sociological, and psychological in the field of justice theory and research. The just world hypothesis and the individual differences in belief in a just world, measured throughout different scales, are discussed. Distinction between personal (when someone is treated fairly) and general (when people get what they deserve) is made. There are also surveys on justice sensitivity (people's reactions toward perceived unfairness/unequal treatment) and justice centrality (personal distress about injustice and the satisfaction of someone's own fairness). The results of Bulgarian study on belief in a just world and justice sensitivity and centrality are presented. The sample includes 457 respondents aged between 18 and 71 years. Average levels on general and personal belief in a just world are established, and statistically significant differences depending on age, gender and ethnic origin are traced out in the respondents' justice centrality and justice sensitivity.

Keywords: belief in a just world (BJW), individual differences, Bulgarian results

Introduction: Definitions and perspectives

The notion of justice is salient both in social life and in scholarly traditions and it is not surprising that it has been examined throughout scholarly history, starting from classical Greek philosophy (e.g., Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Plato's *Republic*), to Karl Marx, Thomas Hobbes, John Stuart Mill and many contemporary empirical oriented researchers from social science disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, psychology, etc. (Sabbagh, Schmitt 2016). Varied disciplinary perspectives guide justice theory and research, and different definitions and classifications are proposed.

The philosophic perspective treats justice mostly as a normative problem and emphasizes on the meaning and importance of justice or tries to identify the norms and principles that would help to realize it. In his seminal book, *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls states, "justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as

truth is of systems of thought” (Rawls 1971, 3) and largely focuses on social justice or the principles that organize and maintain society (Rawls 1971). Although philosophers are still not in agreement as to which rules and principles can promote justice in a society, they more or less agree on three basic formal criteria that constitute a state of justice: (1) equal treatment or individuals should be treated equally under the same relevant conditions; (2) impartiality or to act in situations of interpersonal conflict of interest according to rules which are acceptable to all parties; and (3) consideration of legitimate claims, that is, individuals should be treated according to what they deserve (Koller, 1995, cited in Liebig, Sauer 2016).

In the last decades the empirical research of justice has been established. In contrast to the normative disciplines, the empirical ones focus on describing observable phenomena and different theories to explain them were developed. Mostly, researchers focus on the empirical validity of conceptions of justice for individuals’ attitudes and behaviour and for the structure and processes of society. Based on the sociological priority to analyse the society, the research examines the empirical reality, which pertains to the conceptions of justice on the level of societies or other forms of social aggregation, such as conceptions and understanding of society about justice, social conditions (e.g., structure, culture, institutions) that affect these conceptions, and the consequences of justice-motivated behaviour of the collective or corporate actors (interest groups, political parties, organizations). Stefan Liebig and Carsten Sauer introduced a multilevel model of sociological explanation and derived four perspectives of sociological justice research: the analysis of institutions and discourses on societal level and the analysis of attitudes and behaviour on individual level (Liebig, Sauer 2016).

The psychological perspective on justice, in contrast to the philosophical one, which focuses on normative or objective aspects of the nature of justice-enforcing structures (what is just *vs* unjust) (e.g., Rawls 1971), is more concerned with subjective aspects (what people perceive as just *vs* unjust) (Gollwitzer, van Prooijen 2016). Unlike the sociological perspective, which typically defines justice on the basis of societal level structures and forces (see Liebig, Sauer 2016), a psychology of justice is more strongly focused on the combination of individual level and situational processes leading to justice-related cognitions, affects, and behaviours (Gollwitzer, van Prooijen 2016).

Also, different classifications of justice are proposed. For instance, there is distributive, procedural, retributive and restorative justice. The distributive justice refers to the perceived justness of the principles and rules that regulate resource distribution (e.g., effort, need) and to the evaluation of the actual outcomes of the distribution in relation to expected outcomes. The procedural justice focuses on the justness of the procedures according to which resource distribution takes place. The retributive justice refers to expected negative outcomes related to resource distribution. In this case the valence of a resource is framed by the observer as “bad” (e.g., punishment or imprisonment). Historically, justice research has focused its attention on the distribution of positive resources, assuming that the understanding of that domain also applies to the distribution of negative resources. Finally, the restorative justice (or reparative justice) also deals with negative outcomes, but rather than stressing formal procedures to

redress justice, it focuses on informal processes whereby the victims, offenders, and communities are encouraged to undertake steps (e.g., apologies, community service or return of stolen goods) to repair the harm (Sabbagh, Schmitt 2016).

Psychological approaches and measurement of belief in a just world

Despite of social, economic and technology development, still inequalities in different life area exist and several psychological theories propose explanations for individual reactions to observed or experienced injustice (for details see Dalbert 2009). One of the most influential is the just world hypothesis introduced by Lerner (1965, 1980) (Lerner 1980). The *just world hypothesis* states that people need to believe in a just world in which everyone gets what he/she deserves and deserves what he/she gets. This belief enables them to deal with their social environment as though it is stable and orderly and thus serves important adaptive functions. As a result, people are motivated to defend their belief in a just world (BJW) when it is threatened by injustices; either experienced or observed (Dalbert 2009). Lerner (1998) has himself reflected on BJW over a quarter of a century after he began writing about it. His thesis is that adults express two forms of the BJW: the first one is conscious and pertains to conventional rules, morality and social judgements, the other is preconscious and includes primitive rules of blaming and automatic emotional consequences (Lerner 1998). Further, for Lerner (1998) the BJW remains a fundamental delusion: 'fundamental' in that it seems essential for most people's sense of sanity and security, and 'delusion' in the sense that it is a factually false belief that is motivationally defended (Furnham 2003, 797).

A substantial amount of research on BJW has been experimental in nature (for a review, see Hafer, Bègue 2005; Dalbert 2009). However, since the 1970s another strand of research has examined individual differences in the BJW triggered by the introduction of the first twenty-item BJW scale by Rubin and Peplau (1975). The scale included both general and domain specific items (e.g., "Basically, the world is a just place"), as well as items on the belief in an unjust world ("Good deeds often go unnoticed and unrewarded") (Rubin, Peplau 1975). In addition, items tapping other constructs, such as authoritarianism (e.g., "When parents punish their children it is almost always for good reasons") occur. In the base of that the scale was later criticize as being heterogeneous in content (Furnham, Procter 1989). In the light of these criticisms, two homogenous general just world scales were developed. First, Dalbert, Montada, and Schmitt (1987) constructed a homogenous six-item scale tapping general BJW (sample item: "I think people try to be fair when making important decisions"), which shows convergent validity with the Rubin and Peplau scale. Then, Lipkus (1991) constructed a seven-item Global BJW Scale that is positively associated with the Rubin and Peplau scale. This approach, started with the work of Rubin and Peplau (1973; 1975) allowed the role of the BJW to be examined within the framework of personality dispositions (Dalbert 2009).

One of the first associations observed between the BJW and other personality dispositions was the positive correlation between general just world belief and

religiosity. Also, a positive and sometimes substantial association was established between authoritarianism and general just world belief, as well as between just world belief and internal locus of control that prompted speculation about an overlap between these two constructs as well (Furnham, Procter 1989). Finally, there is some evidence suggesting that the BJW as a personality trait correlates with global personality dimensions. In particular, empirical findings indicate a negative relationship between personal just world belief and neuroticism, consistent with the positive outlook that the BJW provides. Taken together, research findings support the differential validity of the BJW within the network of personality dispositions (Dalbert 2009).

Since the 1990s, more studies have investigated the positive as well as the negative social consequences of the BJW, and the focus of these investigations has been extended to cover the consequences of holding a BJW for the believers (Dalbert 2009). These studies have shown that it is necessary to distinguish the belief in a personal just world, in which one is usually treated fairly, from the belief in a general just world or the belief in a just world for others, in which people in general get what they deserve (Dalbert 1999). In line with the self-serving bias in general and in fairness reasoning in particular, research evidences that people tend to endorse the personal more strongly than the general BJW and that the two constructs have a different meaning (Dalbert 2009). The personal BJW is a better predictor of adaptive outcomes (e.g., subjective well-being), and the BJW for others or in general is a better predictor for example of harsh social attitudes (Bègue, Muller 2006).

In addition, other differentiations of the just world construct have also been proposed. For example, the general belief in a just world has been differentiated from the general belief in an unjust world (for details see Dalbert 2009). Also, individuals differ greatly in their reactions to identical incidents of injustice and it is not possible to explain justice-related judgments, emotions, and actions solely by situational and contextual factors. It seems plausible to assume that these differences stem from how easily individuals perceive injustice and how strongly they react to it, hence their justice sensitivity. Then it is a further specifically justice-related disposition that was proposed as an indicator of an individual's concern for justice (Baumert et al. 2013). Unlike the BJW, this personality disposition directly captures stable and consistent differences in individuals' readiness to perceive injustice and in the strength of their cognitive, emotional, and behavioural reactions to injustice. Schmitt and colleagues (2010) conceptualized justice sensitivity as a personality trait and distinguished four components of justice sensitivity according to the perspectives of a victim, observer, beneficiary, and perpetrator, all of which can be adopted toward an injustice. They developed Justice Sensitivity Inventory and outlined its factorial validity, links to personality traits and found small demographic effects (Schmidt et al. 2010). Based on their review of available research, Baumert and Schmitt (2016) concluded that information processing such as selective attention, selective interpretation, and selective memory is involved in justice sensitivity and translates its effects into reactions to injustice (Baumert, Schmitt 2016). Therefore, in our study we included instrument for justice sensitivity - Beneficiary Perspective (Dalbert, Umlauf 2003), or scale for feelings of distress over injustice that is to one's own

advantage (e.g., “I feel guilty when I receive better treatment than others”), as well as Justice Centrality Scale (Dalbert, Montada, Schmitt 1987) gauging distress about injustice and satisfaction with one’s own fairness (e.g., “There are few things that make me as happy as justice”).

Individual differences in belief in a just world

Individual differences in perceptions of justice partly result from differential treatment. In many social contexts some people are rewarded more fairly than others, some are treated more fairly than others, etc. However, individual differences in perceived justice cannot be fully accounted for by differential treatment. Justice judgments and behaviour also depend on relatively stable individual differences in attitudes, beliefs, and personality factors (Schmitt et al. 2010). Furthermore, individuals differ in their belief in justice (Rubin, Peplau 1975). Individuals with a weak BJW perceive injustice more easily than do people with a strong BJW (Dalbert 2001). Also, people differ in how justice sensitive they are in general, that is, in how readily they feel unjustly treated and in how strongly they react to perceived unfairness. Moreover, several studies have shown that individual differences in justice sensitivity are stable across time (Schmitt et al. 2010).

The research on BJW as a personality disposition in the last years shows that this disposition enables people to deal with their physical and social environment as though it were stable and orderly. The BJW has been seen as personal resource that helps people cope with the events of their daily life, as we knew the stronger the resource, the better equipped they are to cope. Further, the meaning of the just world belief also seems to differ systematically across the lifespan (Dalbert 2009). Until the age of seven or eight, children typically believe in immanent justice, and they are convinced that wrongdoings are automatically punished (Piaget 1932/1997). As they grow older, however, they slowly abandon this belief in immanent justice (Dalbert 2009). During adolescence, personal and general just world beliefs emerge as two distinct beliefs, as the strength of both beliefs seems to decrease slightly during adolescence and young adulthood. The strength of just world belief seems to increase again slightly in late adulthood and old age (Dalbert 2001). In adolescence and young adulthood, especially, the just world belief main function seems to be to provide trust in the fairness of the world, thus enabling people to master challenges in school and at the workplace and to invest in their personal goals. In old age, when the remaining lifetime is shorter, the just world belief primary function seems to be to provide a framework to help people interpret the events of their life in a meaningful way. A strong just world belief allows older adults to see themselves as having been less discriminated during the course of their life, prevents them from ruminating about the negative aspects of their life, and instead enables them to find meaning in it (Dalbert 2009).

There are studies related to the individual differences in BJW, most of which have been conducted in the US and the results are mixed. A meta-analytic review of 33 studies, which examined differences in BJW scores, concluded that

the weighted average effect size was .12, which suggests that males are slightly more likely than females to believe in a just world (O'Connor, Morrison, McLeod, Anderson 1996, cited in Furnham 2003, 810). At the same time, a more recent study confirmed no significant sex difference in BJW (Durm, Stowers 1998, cited in Furnham 2003, 810). A strong factor influencing BJW is the experienced injustice. Therefore, it may be expected, that people with disadvantages or lower income as women, minority members, etc. will have a lower BJW. Available studies are few and rather inconsistent, so it is worth researching the impact of age, gender, and ethnic background in future research.

Bulgarian research results

Part of the results we have on BJW in Bulgarian sample are presented on personal and general BJW, as well as justice sensitivity and justice centrality. The goal was to start process of adaptation in Bulgarian language of different belief in a just world's measurements and to check for their reliability. In addition, analyses of individual differences (i.e., age, gender and ethnic origin) in just world belief as a personality disposition are planned due to their serious negligence by researchers (Furnham, Procter 1989). We assume a moderate expression of BJW due to the existence of serious injustices in the Bulgarian society and the higher sensitivity to them. Also, we suppose significant individual differences depending on age, gender and ethnic origin. Particularly, we expect stronger BJW in older people, women and minority groups (Dalbert 2009; Furnham 2003; Schmitt et al. 2010).

The sample included 457 respondents aged between 18 and 71 years, with 242 males and 215 females. Nearly half of the sample (N = 228) included 18-year-old Bulgarian students from secondary schools that allow us to look for age differences in BJW scales. The BJW was measured through: a) Dalbert's (1999) Personal Belief in a Just World Scale (seven items, e.g., "I believe that I usually get what I deserve") and b) General Belief in a Just World Scale (six items, e.g., "I think basically the world is a just place") (Dalbert 1999); c) Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Maes, and Arbach's (2005) Justice Sensitivity Scale - Beneficiary Perspective, with seven items tapping feelings of distress over injustice that is to one's own advantage (e.g., "I feel guilty when I receive better treatment than others") (Schmitt et al. 2010); and d) the extended version (Dalbert, Umlauf 2003) of the Dalbert, Montada, and Schmitt (1987) Justice Centrality Scale, with 13 items gauging distress about injustice and satisfaction with one's own fairness (e.g., "There are few things that make me as happy as justice") (Dalbert, Umlauf 2003). The responses were given on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

The reliability of four BJW scales measured through the Cronbach's Alpha are presented on Table 1 varying from 0.64 (General BJW) to 0.83 (Justice Sensitivity), so they are completely acceptable for the study purpose. The correlations between subscales of BJW are positive and expected, as they are stronger between General and Personal BJW (.59), as well as Justice Centrality and Justice Sensitivity (.47). Other research also found similar associations

between General and Personal BJW (e.g., Lipkus, Dalbert, Siegler 1996). The inter-correlations between the four BJW scales in our research are in line with the theoretical assumptions that differentiate BJW and Justice Sensitivity as personality variables.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's Alpha and correlations of four BJW scales (N = 457)

BJW scales	M	SD	A	2	3	4
1. General BJW	3.91	0.83	.64	.59***	.27***	.23***
2. Personal BJW	4.03	0.82	.74		.30***	.19**
3. Justice Centrality	4.33	0.77	.80	.30***		
4. Justice Sensitivity	3.82	0.95	.83	.19**	.47***	

Correlation is significant on level: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$.

The descriptive statistics of justice related scales presented on Table 1 trace out similar scores for nearly all scales of BJW. In details, General (M = 3.91) and Personal (M = 4.03) BJW scores are close, although respondents give a slight lead to Justice Centrality (M = 4.33). The lowest but still close to other subscales are the results for Justice Sensitivity (M = 3.82). The results obtained indicate average results for the levels of the BJW in the Bulgarian sample, with the significance of centrality of justice in their lives highlighted, followed by personal BJW and the importance of fairness in the world as a whole. To the lowest degree, respondents rate the sensitivity to justice in the aspect of beneficiary sensitivity or of feelings of distress over injustice that is to one's own advantage.

The expectations for significant age, gender and ethnic differences in BJW were partly supported (see Table 2). There is no significant age, gender and ethnic differences in Personal and General BJW. However, there were differences in the scales of Justice Sensitivity and Justice Centrality depending on age, gender and ethnic background. In details, females and people from Turkish background showed higher Justice Centrality and Justice Sensitivity than males and Bulgarians. Also, there was a significant age effect on Justice Centrality and Sensitivity, as being more important for adults than for adolescents.

The results obtained can be explained in few lines. First, the age effect was expected due to differences in the meaning of the just world belief across the lifespan (Dalbert 2009). The slight decrease in BJW during the adolescence and increase in the adulthood was mentioned (Dalbert 2001). The increase of BJW in young adulthood provides trust in the fairness of the world, thus enabling people to master life challenges (work, family etc.), and in old age the just world belief's function is to provide a framework to help people interpret the events of their life in a meaningful way (Dalbert 2009). Therefore, the obtained age effect can be explained in the line of lifespan changes. Still, it has to be pointed out that there are no age differences in personal (in which one is usually treated fairly) and general (in which people get what they deserve) BJW. This may be

Table 2. Differences in BJW scales by age, gender and ethnicity. ANOVA results (N = 457)

Variables	18 N = 228		19-71 N = 229		F	Male N = 243		Female N = 215		F	Bulgarian N = 309		Turks N = 142		F
	M	SD	M	SD		M	SD	M	SD		M	SD	M	SD	
General BJW	M	3.92	3.90		ns	3.89	3.94	3.91	3.95	ns	3.91	3.95	3.95	ns	
	SD	0.82	0.84			0.84	0.82	0.86	0.74						
Personal BJW	M	3.97	4.10		ns	4.03	4.03	4.05	4.03	ns	4.05	4.03	4.03	ns	
	SD	0.84	0.80			0.81	0.84	0.84	0.73						
Justice Centrality	M	4.07	4.57		F = 53.63*** $\eta^2_p = 0.11$	4.23	4.43	4.27	4.45	F = 7.66** $\eta^2_p = 0.02$	4.27	4.45	4.45	F = 5.73* $\eta^2_p = 0.01$	
	SD	0.72	0.74			0.81	0.72	0.79	0.71						
Justice Sensitivity	M	3.64	3.99		F = 16.29*** $\eta^2_p = 0.04$	3.71	3.93	3.70	4.06	F = 5.73* $\eta^2_p = 0.01$	3.70	4.06	4.06	F = 13.59*** $\eta^2_p = 0.03$	
	SD	0.94	0.94			0.99	0.91	0.97	0.89						

*** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05, η^2_p - Partial Eta Squared.

due to the fact that Bulgarian 18-year-old adolescents are more mature, as our research on their functional values established, since they have high existential and normative values (Tair, Gouveia, Popova 2016). Therefore, they also do not differ from adults in their just world beliefs. The differences are established in Justice Sensitivity (feelings of distress over injustice that is to one's own advantage) and Justice Centrality (distress about injustice and satisfaction with one's own fairness) that may be due to the more complex and possibly later developed just world beliefs function to provide a framework for interpretation of the events of one's life. Higher justice sensitivity and centrality allow older people to cope with injustice and the negative aspects of their life (Dalbert 2009), but it needs time and experience to develop.

Second, the established gender effects in Justice Sensitivity and Justice Centrality are not surprising. It was expected that females suffer more strongly from injustice and are more sensitive to unfairness. Despite some suggestions that the systematic correlation of demographic factors with BJW seems to be an area that has been seriously neglected by researchers (Furnham, Procter 1989), yet, there are some results showing that females are significantly more justice sensitive than males (Schmitt et al. 2010). This difference may reflect higher emotional vulnerability of women, their greater concern for the well-being of others or their lower aggressiveness (Alfermann 2005). This interpretation is speculative, of course. It may also be the case, for instance, that women are more sensitive than men, because they are disadvantaged compared to men in many life domains (Schmitt et al. 2010).

Third, ethnic differences in Justice Sensitivity and Justice Centrality were also expected, due to minority groups' unequal social position. Other research (e.g., Furnham 1985; Smith, Green 1984) has already demonstrated low levels of BJW in some unprivileged groups. Furthermore, one of the first associations observed between the BJW and other personality dispositions was the positive correlation between just world belief and religiosity (Rubin, Peplau 1973; Furnham, Gunter 1984, cited in Furnham, Procter 1989). In the same line, our research on values of different ethnic groups in Bulgaria discovered higher level of normative values (i.e., obedience, tradition, religiosity) in Turks group (Tair, Gouveia, Popova 2016).

Conclusion

The presented results confirm that justice is a central issue in people's lives and there are no age, gender and ethnic differences in their general and personal BJW or in their belief that people want to get what they deserve and deserve what they get. People prefer to be treated fairly and the other people also to be treated in such way, otherwise they become sensitive to injustice. The results present significant differences in justice centrality and justice sensitivity in different age, gender and ethnic groups. First, justice centrality and sensitivity increases with age and this could indicate that repeated exposure to injustices has a sensitizing rather than a desensitizing effect. Second, women are more justice sensitive and have a higher level of justice centrality compared to men.

This difference may reflect women's elevated emotional vulnerability and their greater concern for the well-being of others or their disadvantaged position in many life domains. Third, Turks have higher justice centrality and justice sensitivity compared to Bulgarians. Possibly, some historical situations from 1980s have made people from Turkish origin more sensitive to social inequalities or this is the result of differences in socialization (more traditional and religious). Clearly, these results and probably speculative interpretations call for future research concerning the psychometrics characteristics of the self-evaluating scales that are used; the associations of BJW as personality dispositions with other personality traits and the location of the justice belief in the personality space of broad domain factors.

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