

6 Belief in a just world, subjective well-being and trust of young adults

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Developmental psychologists (Levinson, 1978; Vaillant, 1977) highlight the numerous challenges that adolescents and young adults face as they become more autonomous and independent in this stage of life. They leave their parents' home, choose and take up an occupation, make plans for the future and learn their constraints, and establish a home and a family of their own. These challenges can be very distressing, and young adults need psychosocial resources to cope with them. In this chapter, we will show that the belief in a just world (BJW) may be positively associated with the ability to cope with these tasks in a way that sustains mental health.

BJW and mental health

The belief-in-a-just-world theory (Lerner, 1980) states that the BJW, according to which all of us get what we deserve, is a fundamental delusion that enables the feeling of invulnerability to persist, even when people are confronted with injustice. According to Lerner, 'People want to and have to believe they live in a just world so that they can go about their daily lives with a sense of trust, hope, and confidence in their future' (1980: 14). The BJW is therefore hypothesised to have the adaptive function of instilling people with confidence and giving meaning to events, which is especially important when people face new tasks. Indeed, there is empirical evidence for associations between BJW and several dimensions of mental health (see Dalbert, 2001, for a review). Moreover, Dalbert (2001) has identified three main functions of the BJW that mediate the effect of BJW on mental health. The first function is to dispose individuals to behave fairly: high believers in a just world will be motivated to achieve their goals by just means. By acting fairly, they respect the terms of the personal contract, which gives them the assurance of being fairly rewarded. Moreover, behaviour congruent with the justice motive will lead to better mental health. The second function of the BJW is to enhance trust in others and in the fairness of one's fate. This has several adaptive consequences because it gives individuals the confidence (a) to invest in

long term goals, (b) to trust others, whom they expect to treat them fairly, and (c) that the tasks they perform will be fairly rewarded and are within their ability to cope, thus prompting better performance in achievement tasks. The third function of the BJW is to provide a framework that helps individuals to interpret their life in a way that preserves the BJW – by restoring justice either psychologically (for example, minimising the injustice) or behaviourally (for example, claiming compensation). This is especially important for innocent victims.

Studies relating BJW and mental health have developed along two lines: with samples of victimised individuals and of non-victimised individuals. As far as victimised individuals are concerned, the data seem to support the hypothesis that BJW is positively associated with victims' mental health. There is some evidence of this, for example, in the cases of mothers of disabled children (Dalbert, 1998) and unemployed workers (Cubela, 2000; Dalbert, 1998; Montada, 1998). Moreover, Hafer and Correy (1999) have shown that when high just world believers face a negative outcome, they make more internal attributions and fewer external attributions than low just-world believers. The authors also found that these attributions lead strong believers in a just world to perceive the negative outcome as less unjust, and to have more positive and fewer negative emotions. Seen in terms of Dalbert's (2001) three functions of the BJW, the relationship between BJW and mental health would be mediated by an interpretation of the event that preserves the victim's BJW.

Another set of studies, to which this study belongs, has examined the relationship between BJW and the mental health of non-victimised individuals facing day-to-day challenges. As we will show, the empirical evidence firmly supports the association between BJW and mental health. According to Dalbert (2001), this association is mediated by trust in others and in the fairness of one's fate. In this chapter, we will present three studies that provide additional evidence for the association between BJW and the mental health of non-victimised young adults. In Studies 1 and 2, we will show that BJW is positively associated with several indicators of mental health in two samples of young adults. In Study 3, in a sample of young adults taken from a representative sample of the Portuguese population, we will show that BJW is associated with trust. Before presenting these studies, we will give an overview of the literature on the relationship between BJW and the constructs considered in the studies.

BJW and life satisfaction

Satisfaction with life is conceptualised as the cognitive component of subjective well-being (Diener *et al.*, 1985). Research has shown that satisfaction with life is positively correlated with another dimension of well-being, namely self-esteem, and negatively correlated with neuroticism (Johnston *et al.*, 1995). Dalbert (1998, 1999) and Dalbert *et al.*, (2001)

obtained significant positive correlations between BJW and satisfaction with life in several samples of university students. Dalbert and Maes (2002) found significant positive correlations between BJW and satisfaction with life, satisfaction with school experience, and school performance in a sample of 1000 5th to 12th grade pupils. Moreover, Dalbert and Katona-Sallay (1996) found a positive correlation between BJW and satisfaction with life up to the point of the assessment. Lipkus *et al.* (1996) showed that several BJW scales are positively correlated with satisfaction with life, and Cubela (2000) confirmed this positive association. Finally, in two samples of couples, Lipkus and Bissonnette (1996) verified that BJW predicted matrimonial satisfaction and a low frequency of conflicts in older couples. For younger couples, the tendency was in the same direction, but was not significant.

BJW and self-esteem

Baumeister (1998) defines self-esteem as the degree to which an individual evaluates him- or herself positively. Self-esteem seems to be associated with psychological well-being, whether the individual finds him- or herself in a favourable or an adverse situation (e.g. Taylor and Brown, 1988). Therefore, self-esteem is considered a personal resource that reduces the impact of negative events in life. Self-esteem is also negatively correlated with depression (Tennen and Affleck, 1993) and with social anxiety (Leary and Kowalski, 1995). Few studies have analysed the correlation between BJW and self-esteem, and the results reported for four different samples are rather diverse: Feather (1991) found correlations of between 0.10 and 0.23; Dalbert (1992a, cited by Dalbert, 2001) reported a correlation of 0.19 between the two constructs, and Dalbert (1999) obtained a correlation of 0.31. Further studies may help to improve our understanding of this relationship.

BJW and interpersonal and institutional trust

As we have already mentioned, one of the functions of the BJW is to enhance trust in others and in the fairness of one's fate (Dalbert, 2001). Several studies have shown a relationship between BJW and both interpersonal and institutional trust. Peplau and Tyler (1975, cited by Rubin and Peplau, 1975) found a positive relationship between scores on the BJW scale and the tendency for higher trust in politicians, a more positive evaluation of political measures, the evaluation of the *status quo* as desirable, and political and economical conservatism. They also found positive correlations between BJW and attitudes to political organisations and government. Therefore, Rubin and Peplau (1975) underline that the BJW may lead to an uncritical acceptance of authority. In three experiments, Zuckerman and Gerbasi (1977) showed that, compared with those low in

Table 6.1 Correlations between BJW and internal locus of control in different studies

Bierhoff <i>et al.</i> (1991)	0.17
Clayton (1992)	0.38
Furnham and Karani (1985)	0.27
Rubin and Peplau (1973)	0.44
Steensma <i>et al.</i> (1994)	-0.48
Zuckerman and Gerbasi (1977)	0.20

distinct constructs, despite the positive correlation between BJW and internal locus of control. Dalbert (2001) suggests that an internal locus of control may mediate the relationship between BJW and achievement, because high believers in a just world tend to attribute their results to their own actions (good things happen to good people), and attributing outcomes to one's ability and effort (internal locus of control) promotes better performance in achievement tasks.

BJW and optimism

Lerner titled his 1980 book *Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion*, indicating that individuals have an illusory belief that people are always fairly rewarded and that good things happen to good people while bad things happen to bad people. Optimism, like BJW, is a positive illusion about the world, the illusion that the world will be benevolent towards the individual, irrespective of his or her actions (good things will happen). However, as Dalbert (2001) showed, BJW and optimism are two relatively independent dimensions, both of which affect mental health in different ways: BJW is a coping resource that helps victims to overcome an unjust fate; optimism is merely a positive illusion associated with good mental health, but is not a resource helping individuals to cope with victimisation.

According to Sheier and Carver (1985), an optimistic orientation reflects the generalised expectation that good things will happen. Sheier and Carver (1987) reviewed the literature that evidenced a positive relationship between optimism (measured in different ways) and physical well-being (as determined by various symptoms like recovery from heart surgery), self-esteem and locus of internal control. They also obtained negative correlations between optimism and depression, and between optimism and perceived stress.

If BJW motivates people to behave fairly, and behaving according to the terms of the personal contract leads individuals to expect that they will be fairly rewarded, one would expect BJW to be positively associated with optimism – both in everyday activities and when individuals face serious risks. Indeed, empirical evidence supports this association. The first study that found BJW to be empirically associated with optimism was conducted by Lerner (1978): both BJW and optimism were aggregated on the same

factor. Lambert *et al.* (1998) found a negative, although not significant, correlation between BJW and the estimated probability of threatening events such as dying in a flood, being hit by a tornado, being involved in a plane hijack, dying of hepatitis, dying of leukaemia and contracting AIDS. These correlations were stronger and more significant for authoritarian individuals who experience the environment in a more threatening way. Lambert *et al.* (1998) explain this result by proposing that the BJW can provide a buffer against the perception of risk for those high in authoritarianism. For those low in authoritarianism, no such buffer is necessary because there is no perception of personal invulnerability to risks. These results are in line with the findings of Maes (1998), which indicated that the higher the BJW, the higher the estimated probability of finding meaning in a serious disease (cancer) and of maturing during the process, the greater the individual's confidence in being able to cope with such a serious disease should he or she contract it, and the higher the feeling of personal invulnerability to that disease. However, when individuals imagined that they had the disease, the higher their BJW, the more likely they were to accept it. Chasteen *et al.* (1996, cited by Lambert *et al.*, 1998) found that individuals high in BJW were more optimistic about the changes and difficulties associated with getting older than those low in BJW.

The empirical evidence reviewed so far supports the hypothesis that the BJW may be associated with young adults' ability to cope with autonomy-related challenges. In particular, we expected BJW to be positively associated with optimism, mental health (self-esteem, satisfaction with life and happiness), locus of internal control, trust and perceptions of social justice.

Study 1

In Study 1, we explore the association of BJW with satisfaction with life, self-esteem, optimism and locus of control, as well as the intercorrelations between the other variables. To our knowledge, this is the first time that all of these constructs have been taken into account simultaneously. We predict positive associations between BJW and satisfaction with life, optimism, internal locus of control and self-esteem.

Participants and procedure

The participants in this study were 252 second-year psychology undergraduates aged between 19 and 25 years ($M = 21.30$, $SD = 1.67$); 204 (81 per cent) were female and 48 (19 per cent) male. During lesson time, participants were invited to participate in a research project studying the properties of some scales and the relationship between several constructs. The time required to complete the questionnaire was around 25 minutes.

At the end of the study participants were thanked for taking part and were debriefed.

Measures

We measured the *BJW* with a Portuguese version of the General Belief in a Just World Scale (GBJW) devised by Dalbert *et al.*, (1987). The scale consists of six items ($\text{Alpha} = 0.60$), and responses were given on a 7-point scale from 1 ('completely disagree') to 7 ('completely agree') rather than on the original 6-point scale. We measured *self-esteem* with Rosenberg's (1965) 10-item self-esteem scale ($\text{Alpha} = 0.80$). Responses were given on a 4-point scale from 1 ('completely disagree') to 4 ('completely agree'). *Satisfaction with life* was measured with the Satisfaction with Life Scale designed by Diener *et al.* (1985; $\text{Alpha} = 0.82$). Responses to its five items were given on a 7-point scale from 1 ('completely disagree') to 7 ('completely agree'). High means on all of these scales indicate strong endorsement of the construct. *Optimism* was assessed with the eight items of the Life Orientation Test (Sheier and Carver, 1985; $\text{Alpha} = 0.71$) measuring dispositional optimism. Responses were given on a 5-point scale from 1 ('completely disagree') to 5 ('completely agree'). Four items were recoded so that the higher the scale mean, the higher the level of optimism. *Locus of control* was measured with Rotter's (1966) locus of control scale ($\text{KR-20} = 0.71$). Answers indicating an internal locus of control were coded as 1, those indicating an external locus of control as 0, and the scores for all the items were summed. The higher the score, the higher the locus of internal control. To prevent systematic influences of the response to some scales on the responses to other scales, the order of the scales was randomised for each participant.

Results

Correlations between the variables are given in Table 6.2. As expected, *BJW* is strongly associated with satisfaction with life, and moderately associated with optimism. This result is in line with the findings of authors such as Maes (1998), Lambert *et al.* (1998), and Dalbert (1998, 1999). *BJW* is also significantly associated with self-esteem, although the relationship is weak. As mentioned above, few studies have explored this association, and there are discrepancies in the results obtained. We believe this relationship should be further explored. Finally, *BJW* is also associated with locus of control, although not very strongly. This is consistent with most of the studies which have found a positive relationship between these two measures. Furthermore, all correlations between optimism, satisfaction with life, and locus of control are significant.

To explore the existence of a direct link between *BJW* and the two mental health dimensions, satisfaction with life and self-esteem, we con-

Table 6.2 Study 1: Correlations between belief in a just world, internal locus of control, optimism, satisfaction with life and self-esteem

	BJW	LC	Opt	SL	Self-esteem
Belief in a just world (BJW)	-	0.14*	0.19**	0.33***	0.13*
Internal locus of control (LC)	-	-	0.33***	0.14*	0.20**
Optimism (Opt)	-	-	-	0.39***	0.54***
Satisfaction with life (SL)	-	-	-	-	0.40***

Notes

* $p < 0.05$.** $p < 0.01$.*** $p < 0.001$.

ducted multiple regression analyses for each mental health dimension separately. In both analyses, optimism and locus of internal control were entered in the first step and BJW was entered in the second step, thus controlling for the effects of optimism and locus of control on mental health (Table 6.3). The results show a direct link between BJW and satisfaction with life when controlling for optimism and locus of internal control; however, there was no such relation between BJW and self-esteem. Moreover, optimism, but not internal locus of control, predicted self-esteem and satisfaction with life. Overall, the results of Study 1 revealed that BJW and satisfaction with life were uniquely associated, and that this held even when controlling for optimism and locus of control. No such unique relationship was observed for BJW and self-esteem.

Table 6.3 Study 1: Regression from satisfaction with life and self-esteem on optimism, locus of control and belief in a just world

Variables	Self-esteem			Satisfaction with life		
	R ²	Beta	t	R ²	Beta	t
<i>Step 1</i>						
Optimism	0.30	0.55	9.06***	0.14	0.33	5.30***
Internal locus of control	0.30	0.03	0.42	0.14	0.01	0.13
<i>Step 2</i>						
BJW	0.30	0.03	0.45	0.22	0.28	4.78***

Notes

* $p < 0.05$.** $p < 0.01$.*** $p < 0.001$.

Study 2

Study 2 was an exact replication of Study 1, except that the locus of control was not included. The participants in this study were 186 undergraduate students aged between 18 and 25 years ($M = 19.83$, $SD = 1.36$); 122 (65.8 per cent) were female and 64 (34.2 per cent) male. With the exception of locus of control, the same measures were applied as in Study 1: General Belief in a Just World Scale: Alpha = 0.72; Self-esteem Scale: Alpha = 0.86; Satisfaction with Life Scale: Alpha = 0.80; Life Orientation Test: Alpha = 0.78. Responses to all items were given on 6-point scales ranging from 1 ('completely disagree') to 6 ('completely agree').

Results

Correlations between the variables are given in Table 6.4. As expected, BJW was positively correlated with satisfaction with life, self-esteem and optimism. These results are in line with the findings of Study 1.

To explore the relationship between BJW and the two mental health dimensions, satisfaction with life and self-esteem, we ran multiple regression analyses for each mental health dimension separately, controlling for the effects of optimism (Table 6.5). In both analyses, optimism was entered in the first step and BJW was entered in the second step. As in Study 1, the results reveal a direct link between BJW and satisfaction with life when controlling for optimism; however, there is no such relation between BJW and self-esteem.

Study 3

In Study 3 we analysed the correlations between BJW and subjective well-being, trust and perceptions of social justice in a sample of young adults taken from a representative sample of the Portuguese population. This study is based on the results of a national survey forming part of the European Values Survey (Halman, 2001). The national survey, called Social

Table 6.4 Study 2: Correlations between belief in a just world, optimism, satisfaction with life and self-esteem

	<i>BJW</i>	<i>Opt</i>	<i>SL</i>	<i>Self-esteem</i>
Belief in a just world (BJW)	–	0.21**	0.35***	0.19**
Optimism (Opt)	–	–	0.55***	0.66***
Satisfaction with life (SL)	–	–	–	0.58***

Notes

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

Table 6.5 Study 2: Multiple regression analysis with optimism and belief in a just world as predictors and satisfaction with life and self-esteem as criteria

Variables	Self-esteem			Satisfaction with life		
	R ²	Beta	t	R ²	Beta	t
<i>Step 1</i>						
Optimism	0.43	0.66	11.67***	0.30	0.55	8.80***
<i>Step 2</i>						
BJW	0.44	0.07	1.23	0.36	0.24	3.86***

Notes

* $p < 0.05$.** $p < 0.01$.*** $p < 0.001$.

Attitudes of the Portuguese People 1999, is coordinated internationally by the European Values Foundation and in Portugal by Manuel Villaverde Cabral and Jorge Vala, who are both at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon. The questionnaire implemented in this national survey included measures of BJW, subjective well-being, trust and perceptions of social justice. We expect higher BJW to be associated with higher subjective well-being, institutional trust and perceptions of social justice.

Sample

The total sample consisted of 1000 individuals aged 18 or over, living in places in Portugal with 10 or more houses. These individuals constitute a random representative sample of the Portuguese population, based on the data of the 1991 Census. The data were collected between October and December 1999 and included 100 sampling points. The participants were interviewed in their homes using a structured questionnaire. This took approximately one hour. For Study 3, we analysed the answers given by all individuals aged between 18 and 25. Thus, the sample for this study consists of 142 young adults (63 male and 79 female) with a mean age of 21.43 years ($SD = 2.31$). This sample is not representative, but because the original sample was selected at random it is heterogeneous, giving the results greater external validity.

Questionnaires

Belief in a just world was measured with the six items of the GBJW scale devised by Dalbert *et al.* (1987; Alpha = 0.70). Responses were given on a 5-point scale from 1 ('completely disagree') to 5 ('completely agree'). The facet of subjective well-being covered was *happiness*, which was measured using the question 'Considering all the aspects of your life, would you say

that you are ...', with response categories ranging from 1 ('not happy at all') to 4 ('very happy'). *Interpersonal trust* was measured with the following question: 'In general, do you think that most people can be trusted or, on the contrary, do you think that it is necessary to be very careful?' Participants were required to choose between the alternatives 0 ('It is necessary to be very careful') and 1 ('Most other people are to be trusted'). To evaluate *institutional trust*, participants were asked to indicate the degree of trust they feel in each of the following institutions: the church, the armed forces, the educational system, the press, the trade unions, the police, parliament, the civil service, the social security system, the European Union, NATO, the United Nations (UN), the health care system, the justice system and major companies, on 4-point scales from 1 ('none') to 4 ('a great deal'). Responses to these questions were averaged to form an institutional trust measure (Alpha = 0.88). The perception of social justice was measured in terms of the perception of respect for human rights in Portugal assessed by the question 'In your opinion, what is the level of *respect for human rights* in Portugal?' on a 4-point scale from 1 ('no respect at all') to 4 ('a lot of respect').

Results

The results show that BJW is positively correlated with institutional trust only (Table 6.6). The more the young adults endorsed the belief that the world is, by and large, a just place, the more they trusted institutions such as the police or the educational system.

Discussion

Young adulthood is a stage of life in which people have to mobilise social and psychological resources in order to face the new challenges associated

Table 6.6 Study 3: Correlations between belief in a just world, happiness, interpersonal trust, institutional trust and perceptions of social justice

	<i>BJW</i>	<i>Happiness</i>	<i>Interpersonal trust</i>	<i>Institutional trust</i>	<i>Respect for human rights</i>
<i>BJW</i>	–	0.12	0.08	0.19*	0.12
<i>Happiness</i>	–	–	0.09	0.17	0.15
<i>Interpersonal trust</i>	–	–	–	0.09	0.04
<i>Institutional trust</i>	–	–	–	–	0.11
<i>Respect for human rights</i>	–	–	–	–	–

Notes

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

with their increasing independence. BJW seems to be one of these resources. In particular, BJW is associated with life satisfaction. Moreover, in Studies 1 and 2, we also found that this relation is a unique one when controlling for optimism and internal locus of control. The more the young adults believed in a general just world, the more satisfied they were with their life. This result is in line with the empirical evidence gathered to date. However, BJW and self-esteem did not prove to be uniquely associated, although a reliable and validated self-esteem measure was used. It is our opinion that future studies should explore the relationship between BJW and self-esteem in more depth.

The positive association between BJW and locus of internal control is in line with most of the empirical evidence. Nevertheless, as shown in Table 6.1, the correlations between these constructs that have been obtained to date vary greatly. This supports the notion that BJW and locus of control are distinct constructs, and that the relationship between them may vary across subjects or conditions. More studies are needed to clarify this association.

BJW was positively associated with institutional trust. This result is in line with the findings of other studies (e.g. Peplau and Tyler, cited by Rubin and Peplau, 1975; Zuckerman and Gerbasi, 1977). The expected positive association between BJW and interpersonal trust was not found, however. This result contradicts the findings of Fink and Guttenplan (1975, cited by Rubin and Peplau, 1975), Lipkus and Bissonnette (1996) and Zuckerman and Gerbasi (1977). Likewise, the expected positive association between BJW and the perception of social justice was not confirmed, thus contradicting the results of Lipkus and Bissonnette (1996, 1998), Finamore and Carlstone (1987), Clayton (1992), Dalbert and Yamauchi (1994) and Cubela (2000).

In sum, the studies presented in this chapter support the assumption that young adults who believe in a just world have better mental health in terms of life satisfaction, and that they thus have better social and psychological resources helping them to cope with developmental tasks than individuals who do not believe in a just world. Is this a simple association or does it reflect causality? BJW theory assumes that it is the BJW that leads to better mental health. However, most evidence of the relationship between BJW and the psychological constructs with which it is associated, particularly those related to psychological well-being, is correlational, and thus does not permit conclusions to be drawn about the direction of the association between BJW and mental health (Dalbert and Maes, 2002). In fact, although BJW theory hypothesises a causal relationship between BJW and mental health, studies on mood and processing of information seem to suggest that it is the heuristic processing of information present when people are in a better mood that leads to a lower perception of injustice and consequently to the preservation of the BJW. In fact, according to the mood-as-information approach (Schwarz, 1990; Schwarz and Clore, 1983,

1988), a positive mood may serve as a signal that everything is all right, meaning that the motivation for effortful information processing is reduced, and the information is processed more heuristically than systematically. This is an avenue for future research in which experimental studies will play an important role. At this stage of research, we can only take note of the positive association between BJW and mental health.

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