

Belief In a Just World

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In 1980, Melvin Lerner wrote a book called 'Belief in a Just World: The Fundamental Delusion'. In his book, he theorised that that people hold beliefs that the world is a just place in which good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people; meaning everyone gets what they deserve. Decades later, this influential theory is known by a few different names including, 'Belief in a Just World', 'Just World Theory', 'Just World Beliefs' and 'BJW'.

The theory may sound crude when written in black and white (and many theorists argued that it was oversimplified and crude), but hundreds of studies have shown that lots of people do indeed believe that the world is a just and fair place which is being controlled by a force of justice. For some people, the feeling that the world is a fair and just place might come from their religion, their cultural norms, their upbringing, their language or from their beliefs about other people.

For example, all the major world religions teach their followers that there is a 'force' which measures good and evil, and either punishes or rewards you – either in life or in an afterlife. This means that millions of people have been taught to believe that if they live a 'good' life and do 'good' deeds, nothing bad should happen to them. This also means that those people have been taught that if something bad happens to someone, it must be because they deserved it.

Belief in a Just World has been found in people of all ages, ethnicities, religions and beliefs, cultures and languages. It varies from person to person. This means that some people might have 'high belief in a just world' or 'low belief in a just world'. For some people, these beliefs are only triggered when something very bad happens to themselves or someone else, and they seek to find meaning or reasoning for why it happened to them.

High and Low BJW

High Belief In A Just World

People who have high belief in a just world may:

- ❖ Score highly on a Just World Belief Psychometric
- ❖ Believe that only good things happen to good people and bad things happen to those who deserve it or are 'bad people'.
- ❖ Believe that when bad things happen to themselves, it's because they are being punished or because they deserve to suffer.
- ❖ Believe in forces such as 'karma' or forces that balance out/explain the justice in the world.
- ❖ Believe that they will be punished in some way for wrongdoing in their own lives.
- ❖ Believe that they are entitled to a good life because they are a 'good person' who doesn't commit sins or hurt others.

Low Belief In A Just World

People who have high belief in a just world may:

- ❖ Score low on a Just World Belief Psychometric
- ❖ Not believe that things happen for a reason.
- ❖ Not believe that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people.
- ❖ Believe the world is random and that there is no way of controlling good and bad things that happen to themselves or to others.
- ❖ Not believe in karma, punishment, reward or 'judgement' in the current life or their afterlife

Expressing Belief In A Just World

Lots of people do not know that they hold these beliefs, but lots of people use them in everyday discourse. Language is an important vehicle for the way we construct the world and the way we understand the world. It only takes a brief consideration of how this reasoning is embedded in societal discourse to realise how often it is engaged in. Examples may include:

Karma will get them in the end.

What goes around comes around.

Come full circle.

Reap what one sows.

They didn't deserve that to happen to them.

Why does the worst always happen to the best people?

They'll get their just deserts.

They'll get their comeuppance.

Why Do People Believe In A Just World?

Researchers theorise that there are two main benefits of employing belief in a just world; especially when we are trying to understand abuse, trauma and crime. Both benefits of belief in a just world create a psychological buffer against the reality that horrible things can happen to anyone at any time (no matter if they are 'good' or 'bad').

1. The first benefit of the belief is that when the person finds out that something horrible has happened to someone else, they can comfortably conclude that they must have done something to deserve, prompt or cause the event.
2. The second benefit then, is that the belief enables the person to believe that it is highly unlikely that the horrible event will ever happen to them, just as long as they keep living a good life, do not do anything unsafe, stupid or reckless and do not do anything to 'invite' bad things to happen to them.

Both benefits leave the person feeling psychologically safer, because they do not have to consider the possibility that this could have happened to them.

When it comes to victim blaming, research has shown that people who have high belief in a just world are more likely to blame victims of crime and suffering. Some researchers argue that

people who hold beliefs in a just world are likely to focus on the behaviour of the victim to try to explain the situation. Where this reasoning fails, and the blame cannot be attributed towards the victim's behaviour, then the blame is often attributed towards the victim's character.

The point of this attribution of blame is supposedly to create balance and to affirm their beliefs by reinterpreting the situation to make it appear just and fair. It is argued by Lerner (1980) that this is because when a 'bad thing' happens to a 'good person' it threatens the observer's beliefs in a just world. When a victim of crime is shown to be innocent, research shows that the person with belief in a just world will engage in much higher levels of derogation and character assassination of a victim, because it helps to restore their belief that the event happened to them for a reason and that the world is a just and fair place to live.

Melvin Lerner also suggested that people will reason backwards when they learn something horrible has happened to someone and will then make assumptions or guesses about their behaviour, character or choices to provide reasons for 'why' they were victimised.

How Does Our Belief In A Just World Impact Society?

As so many people believe in a just world or hold biases and beliefs that are supportive of the notion that the world is a just a fair place in which bad things only happen to bad people – the belief has a large impact on many areas of our society. The beliefs may impact:

- ❖ The Criminal Justice System
- ❖ Employment and Benefits
- ❖ Global and National Politics
- ❖ Juries and Panels
- ❖ Health and Social Care
- ❖ Access to Education and Advice
- ❖ Social Justice
- ❖ Human Rights
- ❖ Understanding of Interpersonal Violence and Abuse
- ❖ Understanding of Disability, Mental Health and Trauma
- ❖ Racism, Sexism and all Forms of Discrimination and Inequality

Every issue listed above could be affected by beliefs that bad things only happen to bad people, or that good things only happen to good people. Rather than addressing inequality and injustice, the belief in a just world can change the way we attribute causation and reasoning to an event and encourage us to find something 'wrong' with the victim of the injustice.

How Does Our Belief In A Just World Impact Our Own Lives And Experiences?

If a person holds beliefs in a just world, they may apply them to themselves or to others. This means that when something bad happens to someone in their lives, they may search for reasons 'why' it happened to them (their character, behaviour, choices, lifestyle etc.).

This also means that if something bad happens to themselves, they may also use their belief in a just world to try to rationalise what happened, such as blaming themselves or repositioning themselves as a 'bad person'. This may include a belief that bad things have happened to them or been done to them by others as part of a punishment from God, as part of karmic justice or as a punishment for bad things they have done in their own lives or to others.

For more information about belief in a just world or victim blaming, please visit www.victimfocus.com or contact Jessica on jessica@victimfocus.org.uk