Effects of Victim Innocence and BJW (Belief in a Just World) Upon Derogation of an Ingroup/Outgroup Victim

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According to the BJW (belief in a just world) theory, a person is more likely to derogate a victim when that victim threatens their BJW. An innocent victim and a victim who is more similar (an ingroup member) are more threatening to a person's BJW than a non-innocent outgroup victim with such a threat resulting in greater victim derogation. In the present study, group membership and victim innocence were manipulated. Group membership was based on status (college students vs. non-college students). College students ($n = 162$) were randomly assigned to either a BJW threatening or BJW confirming condition. A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVA (analysis of variance) found an interaction between the BJW manipulation and group membership; participants whose BJW was threatened derogated the non-student (outgroup) more than the control. Contrary to expected results, the college student (ingroup) victim was not as highly derogated as the outgroup member. We suggest that more subtle social categories (not just differences associated with traditional racial or ethnic prejudice) may influence the ways individuals defend or reestablish their BJW.

Keywords: BJW (belief in a just world), ingroup favoritism, victim derogation

Introduction

People undergo the challenges and trials of daily life based on a belief that such experiences will eventually provide for a satisfying outcome. More specifically, Lerner (1980) speculated that most people subscribe to a belief that "You get what you deserve and you deserve what you get". The theory, BJW (belief in a just world), provides a means of justifying the status quo (Hafer & Choma, 2009) in that those who work hard will ultimately be rewarded and those who do not will not receive rewards or will be punished. An interesting aspect of BJW pertains to negative outcomes. Various studies (Furnham & Gunter, 1984; Lerner & Simmons, 1966; Olson & Hafer, 2001) have shown that when negative outcomes occur, individuals who believe in a just world assume that the victim deserved that result.

This BJW allows people to rationalize working hard, day in and day out, perhaps receiving no immediate reward, but believing that there will be a reward at some point. Conversely, people who do bad things inevitably will receive punishment at some point. According to Lerner (1980), everyone holds this belief but individual differences result in some holding the belief more strongly than others. Based upon theory and empirical work, the typical finding is that individuals with a strong BJW are more threatened by someone perceived to be similar, relative to a victim who is "not one of us" (Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2007; Lerner &

Miller, 1978; Novak & Lerner, 1968). Individuals who more readily relate to or perceive the victim as similar are more likely to believe the same outcome could befall them. Faced with this threat, individuals search for ways to justify the victim's circumstances, so their BJW can be restored or maintained. One means of justifying the victim's negative situation is to derogate the victim.

Derogation of the victim (secondary victimization) has been found in previous research (Aguiar, Vala, Correia, & Pereira, 2008; Correia & Vala, 2003; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005). Correia and Vala (2003) found that experimentally manipulating the threat to one's BJW, by having one group of college students read a statement, disconfirming a belief in the value of higher education (priming a threat to BJW), resulted in greater victim derogation in that group relative to a group who read a statement confirming that belief (priming confirmation of BJW). Experimental priming of threats to BJW has been used in previous research as well (Appelbaum, Lennon, & Aber, 2006; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005). Derogating the victim works to reinstate the BJW by giving negative, or less positive, attributes to someone who is in an unjust situation. When a person is presented with a scenario of a victim who has done everything to escape the situation but cannot, attributing negative traits to that victim is the person's way of transforming the victim into someone who must deserve that circumstance, thus reinforcing the belief that people get what they deserve.

What kind of situation would lead a person to derogate a victim? In other words, what is considered as a threatening situation? Hafer and Begue (2005) suggested that the effect of BJW is best observed when participants are emotionally impacted by the threatening stimuli. One means of accomplishing this effect is to portray the situation threatening their belief as a real, not hypothetical, event. Other research (Correia & Vala, 2003; Hafer, 2000) has shown that the innocence of the victim contributes to the amount of threat experienced by the observer. Appelbaum, Lennon, and Aber (2003) asked participants to rate the deservingness of a woman supporting two children regarding the receipt of government healthcare. In the study, the mother was described in different conditions as having taken different numbers of actions to improve her situation. The results of the study found that the more effort the woman gave (the more things she tried to do), the less deserving she was viewed by those holding strong beliefs in a just world. A follow-up study showed that when the victim "takes either no steps or just one step to improve her situation" those with a strong BJW actually find her "to be more deserving". It is not until the victim tries substantially to change her situation that those with a strong BJW become threatened and begin to blame the victim (Appelbaum et al., 2006).

Thus far, victim similarity, victim innocence and actions taken by the victim have been discussed as related to increased victim derogation. Research by Correia et al. (2007) investigated whether BJW is affected by intergroup differences. Results obtained in this study using a modified Stroop task (Hafer, 2000) found that latencies associated with the identification of justice words were longer for an ingroup victim (a child from a Portuguese family) than for an outgroup victim (a gypsy child). The authors suggest such latencies indicated that the ingroup victim was a greater threat to participants' BJW. Victim derogation was not assessed in this study.

However, Aguiar et al. (2008) found that an outgroup victim (a gypsy child) was subject to greater secondary victimization (victim derogation) than an ingroup victim (a Portuguese child) when victim derogation was measured either explicitly by a Likert scale measure, or implicitly by measuring the time required to form an impression of the victim. The authors suggested that their results were due to the operation of an ingroup favoritism effect. This effect was likely a result of prejudice, because the outgroup victim (a gypsy child) was a member of a culturally derogated group within Portuguese society.

Based upon the results obtained by Aguiar et al. (2008), the present study sought to extend this work

(Aguilar et al., 2008; Correia et al., 2007) within the context of intergroup relations. Specifically, we examined whether ingroup favoritism would continue to be observed for victims who did not possess racial/cultural characteristics thought to result in prejudice. In the present research, ingroup and outgroup victims did not differ on the basis of racial/cultural background but did, instead, differ in status with the ingroup victim sharing the same status (person attending college) as the participants. The outgroup victim was a non-student (someone who had chosen to enter the work force directly following high school). Therefore, prejudice resulting from racial/cultural differences was not expected to be a significant factor influencing victim derogation here.

In a real world example described by Scott (2008), parents were derogated for accepting health insurance coverage because of inadequate financial resources. The family had exhausted all their savings and had reached a level of sufficient poverty, so as to qualify for welfare. Similarly, the victim in our scenario, in addition to suffering serious physical injury, lost all employer provided health insurance, and was unable to secure other private health care insurance. This scenario was portrayed as an actual newspaper article depicting an event in an adjacent state. We expected that this result, where the victim suffers both significant physical injury and psychological stress due to the fact that the medical bills were quite large and unpaid, would threaten participants' BJW.

We hypothesized that those participants whose BJW was threatened would evince higher victim derogation scores for innocent victims compared to non-innocent victims (Hypothesis 1a) and would have higher derogation scores, regardless of the victim's innocence, compared to the participants in the control condition, whose BJW was not threatened (Hypothesis 1b). In addition, participants in the BJW threat condition would more highly derogate the ingroup victim compared to the outgroup victim (Hypothesis 2a) with this difference in derogation scores being maintained when compared to the participants in the control condition, regardless of group membership (Hypothesis 2b).

Method

Participants

One hundred and sixty-two undergraduate students enrolled in a freshman level psychology course took part in this study. Of these 162 participants, 66 were male (40.7%) and 96 (59.3%) were female. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 32 years ($M = 19.76$; $SD = 2.872$). Half of the sample reported growing up in an area having relatively few people (a rural area or a small town or city having less than 10,000 people). The remaining 50% of the sample grew up in cities having more than 10,000 people. The majority of the participants described themselves as somewhat to moderately religious (60%), 23% reported being not very or not at all religious, and the remaining 17% indicated being very religious. Most of the participants went to church either once or twice a year (24%) or once a week (22%). Thirty-five percent of the participants attended church between 2-3 times a month or a couple times a year. Six percent attend church more than once and week and 13% never attend church. Fifty-seven percent of the sample reported having no doubt that God exists. Another 27% reported believing in God but did report having occasional doubts.

Experimental Design and Procedure

We used a between-subjects ($2 \times 2 \times 2$) design with three independent variables: BJW manipulation, victim innocence and ingroup/outgroup membership. The BJW manipulation consisted of primes either threatening or confirming participants' BJW. Victims were depicted either as innocent or non-innocent of potentially causing themselves harm. Group membership of the victim (ingroup vs. outgroup) was manipulated

by varying the victim's student status.

Questionnaires were administered to participants in college classrooms in groups no larger than 30. Participants first responded to questions measuring demographic characteristics and then were presented with the BJW manipulation. To assess the efficacy of the manipulation, three manipulation check questions followed. Random assignment of participants resulted in participants, reading one of four scenarios and resulting from the combination of the victim innocence and ingroup/outgroup variables. Finally, participants were asked to rate how well a set of adjectives described the victim, to assess whether the victim's situation was justified and whether the victim could have avoided the situation.

Independent Variables

BJW manipulation. Participants read one of two primes reporting a fictitious news report published by CNN (a 24-hour television news channel), one prime threatening their BJW or one confirming it. The text of threatening prime stated that attending college was a waste of time and money, while the reinforcing prime indicated that attending college was worthwhile and financially beneficial in the long term. These primes were designed to be comparable to those used by Correia and Valla (2003). To assess the effectiveness of the threat, we asked three questions immediately after they read the passage: "How confident are you that you made the right decision to attend college?"; "How confident are you that the above information is accurate?"; and "How confident are you that the above information applies to you and your career?". Responses on each question were assessed using a 7-point scale that ranged from 1 ("Not at all confident") to 7 ("Very highly confident").

Victim innocence and group membership of the victim ingroup/outgroup membership. Manipulation of victim's innocence and the victim's membership in an ingroup or outgroup was accomplished by randomly assigning participants to read one of four stories about a person who experienced a life-altering car accident. A victim described as a college student was defined as being a member of the ingroup. A victim who pursued work at a fast food restaurant immediately after high school graduation was defined as a member of the outgroup. The college student victim was described either as returning home immediately after a study session at the college library (victim innocent condition) or as returning home following a party at a college fraternity (victim non-innocent condition). Similarly, the non-student was depicted either as returning home immediately following work (victim innocent condition) or following a wedding reception at a local restaurant (victim non-innocent condition). In the scenario, the sex of the victim was not identified. In addition, in situations involving party or wedding reception attendance, the victim was not specifically described as consuming any alcohol or drug.

Dependent Variables

Derogation of the victim. To assess derogation of the victim, participants evaluated 10 adjectives, five negative (e.g., stupid and selfish) and five positive (e.g., nice and warm) in a 7-point scale (1 = "Not at all descriptive"; 7 = "Very highly descriptive"). The five positive adjectives (polite, responsible, mature, nice and warm) were recoded, so that high scores reflected a more negative view of the victim.

Perception of justness. Assessment of participants' perception of the justness of the situation was determined by ratings in a 7-point scale (1 = "Completely unjust"; 7 = "Completely just"). Participants responded to the following question, "How would you characterize the situation in which 'X' finds himself/herself?".

Perception of avoidability. To assess the avoidability of the situation, we asked the participants "Could 'X' have avoided this situation?". They responded to this question with a number in a scale ranging from 1 ("No, not at all") to 7 ("Yes, completely").

Results

Manipulation Check

To check the manipulation of the threat to the participants BJW, three independent *t*-tests were conducted on participant responses to the three questions asked immediately following the BJW manipulation. Regarding the decision to attend college, no significant difference was found between the BJW threat and control conditions. On the remaining two questions, significant differences were indicated. Participants in the BJW threat condition ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.43$) were significantly less confident ($t_{(160)} = -6.89$, $p = 0.001$) than those in the control condition ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.24$). Similarly, confidence that the information was applicable to the participant's career was significantly lower ($t_{(160)} = -9.04$, $p = 0.001$), for participants in the BJW threat condition ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.62$) relative to the control condition ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.35$).

Dependent Variables

Victim derogation. The three-way ANOVA of victim derogation found no significant main effects but did result in two two-way interactions. One interaction was between the BJW manipulation and group membership ($F_{(1, 154)} = 5.17$, $p = 0.024$, $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = 0.032$). Simple main effects analyses indicated that there was no difference between the BJW threat ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.57$) and control ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.93$) conditions for ingroup victims. However, a significant difference in the BJW manipulation was presented for outgroup victims ($t_{(79)} = 2.33$, $p = 0.023$). The participants whose BJW was threatened derogated the outgroup (non-student) more ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.49$) than the participants whose BJW was confirmed ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.78$). The other two-way interaction between group membership and victim innocence ($F_{(1, 154)} = 4.34$, $p = 0.039$, $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = 0.027$) resulted from the non-innocent, outgroup victim receiving more derogation ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.09$) than the innocent outgroup victim ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.12$; $t_{(79)} = -2.56$, $p = 0.012$). No significant differences were observed among ingroup members who differed in innocence.

Situation avoidance. A three-way ANOVA examined situation avoidance and failed to find any significant main effects but did find a two-way interaction between group membership and victim innocence ($F_{(1, 153)} = 4.04$, $p = 0.046$, $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = 0.026$). Simple main effects analysis found that participants thought the non-innocent ingroup victim was more able to avoid the situation ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.54$) than the non-innocent and outgroup victim ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 1.09$; $t_{(77)} = 2.76$, $p = 0.007$). No significant differences were observed for group membership when the victim was innocent.

Justness of the situation. No significant main effects or interactions were found in relation to this variable.

Discussion and Conclusions

We first address questions regarding the effectiveness of the BJW manipulation. Participants presented with BJW threat appeared to deny the validity of information that either suggested college was less advantageous to their future earnings or that the information in the CNN news story was applicable to their anticipated future career. Both of these results signal that participants in the threat condition were more negatively affected by the manipulation, relative to those in the control condition. This resulted in an attempt by participants to distance themselves from the information by denying its validity.

Regarding the major results of this study, the hypotheses specifying that the BJW manipulation would interact with victim innocence and group membership were not supported. First, the BJW manipulation failed to yield consistent differences between the group whose BJW was threatened and the control group. Further, we

hypothesized, based upon the BJW theory (Lerner, 1980) that the ingroup target (a college student), thought to be most similar to the participants, would receive the greatest derogation. Instead, we found that the outgroup victim was derogated significantly more by those in the threat condition than by the participants in the control condition. This is similar to findings by Aguiar et al. (2008, Study 2). Prejudice, rather than BJW threat, was the explanation of results obtained by those authors.

Two possible explanations of the results obtained here are posited. First, ingroup favoritism offers a relatively simple explanation. Our college student participants were more willing to derogate a non-student than someone who shared the same student status. This explanation is related to a second possible explanation. Although we created victims whose race or culture was unlikely to engender prejudice, another form of prejudice may have affected perceptions of our victims. Individuals who began working directly out of high school may have been regarded by our college-attending participants in a negative way, given that the victim was described as working at a relatively low status job, an assistant manager at Burger King, and apparently had no aspirations of attending college. To eliminate this possible effect in future research, one should use either a different threatening situation or a different outgroup victim. If a different outgroup victim is used, the victim's race/culture should be benign.

Interestingly, the manipulation of victim innocence was only found to result in victim derogation when the victim was an outgroup member. It seems that college student participants more heavily scrutinized the behavior of the non-student victim attending the wedding reception finding it easier to harshly evaluate this outgroup member, relative to an ingroup victim. This result may also reflect the effect of ingroup favoritism.

However, the effect of ingroup favoritism may be limited by the familiarity with college life found among college participants. An outgroup victim returning home from a wedding reception was viewed as less likely to have avoided the accident, relative to a student victim returning from a fraternity party. This result seems inconsistent with the explanation of ingroup favoritism or prejudice described above. Although both of these situations were created to lead participants to assume that the victim had been drinking and driving, this fact was not explicitly stated. It is possible that fraternity parties are more readily associated with drinking than wedding receptions. This association may have been particularly strong among our college student participants who may more easily draw upon such stereotypes.

One obvious limitation of this study is its limited generalizability. Effort should be expended to examine the belief systems and defense mechanisms used by adults living in the world outside the college environment. Observation of any news report suggests that a significant number of American adults have the opinion that the world (particularly the political and economic structure in the United States) is no longer operating as they perceive it should, and the dishonest benefit, while the hard working American pays higher taxes and is less certain of their future due to plant closure or home foreclosure. One aspect of the frustration with the perceived system is an increasing tendency to differentiate "us vs. them". Work by Jost and others (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi, & Mosso, 2005; Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Kay & Jost, 2003) is one example of attempts to increasingly understand the perceptions and motivations of adults living in this and other societies.

In sum, the results obtained in this study stand together with others (Aguiar et al., 2008; Correia et al., 2007) who posited that the perceived social category one inhabits may be a potent factor determining the extent and nature of secondary victimization. The findings obtained here further suggest that more subtle social categories (not just those differences associated with traditional racial or ethnic prejudice) influence the ways

individuals defend or reestablish their BJW. The fact that individuals whose BJW is threatened may utilize such subtle distinctions between victims (viz., student status) suggests an inclination to protect other interconnected characteristics used to affirm their conception of themselves, perhaps formed throughout their life. Moreover, use of such subtle distinctions perhaps also implies a willingness to utilize an increasingly wider and more subtle set of distinctions by which “my world” and “people like me” are psychologically distanced from others. One possibility is that the greater the perceived threat to one’s beliefs about the world, the breadth, scope and subtlety of distinctions used to defend or maintain those beliefs may increase.

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