Beliefs in a Just World, Subjective Well-Being and Attitudes Towards Refugees Among Refugee Workers

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Abstract   Previous research has shown that the belief that the world is fair to the self (BJW-self) is positively related to indices of subjective well-being, whereas the belief that the world is fair to others (BJW-others) is positively related to harsher social attitudes. The present study aims to investigate the relation between these two forms of beliefs in a just world and the subjective well-being and social attitudes of people working with refugees. A sample of 253 refugee workers completed measures of BJW-others, BJW-self, perceived stress, life satisfaction, attitudes towards refugees and empathy for refugees. We found that refugee workers with stronger BJW-self reported experiencing less stress and more life satisfaction. Stronger BJW-others, however, predicted harsher attitudes towards refugees while controlling for BJW-self. These findings highlight the important function that justice beliefs play in the subjective well-being and social attitudes of refugee workers.

Keywords   Just world beliefs · Victim derogation · Subjective well-being · Refugee workers

Introduction

Worldwide, people work in organisations trying to help refugees rebuild their lives after suffering atrocities such as war and sexual violence. People working with refugees either provide direct assistance (e.g. doctors, lawyers, therapists, interpreters) or work in indirect capacities (e.g. researchers, advocates, policy-makers). They frequently encounter numerous people who have experienced huge losses, deeply traumatic events and grave injustices. For example, legal advisors are required to listen to detailed accounts of violence and torture in order to assist with

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the preparation of legal testimonies. Despite their best efforts, refugee workers are rarely able to meet the basic needs of refugees, let alone end their suffering. Consequently, people working with refugees are confronted on a daily basis with victims of injustice who continue to suffer in extremis.

The danger of working in this context is that refugee workers can suffer with stress-related syndromes such as "compassion fatigue" (the diminished ability or willingness to be empathic towards suffering clients Adams, Boscarino, & Figley, 2006) and "burn out" (emotional exhaustion Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). In the words of the physician David Hilfiker, "All of us who attempt to heal the wounds of others will ourselves be wounded" (1985, p. 207). In line with this idea, much research has been conducted into the emotionally exhausting nature of working with vulnerable populations, such as refugees (e.g. van der Linden, Keijsers, Eling, & van Schaijk, 2005; Pope & Vasquez, 2011).

In addition, refugee workers are at risk of responding to refugees with derogation and blame rather than compassion and empathy. Research has shown that individuals who are suffering unfairly are often met with harsh social attitudes. For example, the poor (Furnham & Gunter, 1984), the unemployed (Reichle, Schneider, & Montada, 1998), people suffering from AIDS (Connors & Heaven, 1990), elderly people (Callan, Dawtry, & Olson, 2012; Bègue & Bastounis, 2003), cancer patients (Braman & Lambert, 2001), the handicapped and victims of sexual assault (for reviews, see Furnham, 2003; Hafer & Bègue, 2005) are just some groups that are sometimes blamed for their misfortune. Strikingly, the less responsible an individual is for his or her misfortune, sometimes the stronger the attribution of blame or responsibility (Lerner & Miller, 1978). Consequently, refugee workers' well-being and their ability to respond to their clients appropriately is at risk simply due to their working circumstances.

Belief in a Just World

According to Lerner's (1980) just world theory, people need to believe that the world is a just place in which individuals generally get what they deserve and deserve what they get. The Belief in a Just World (BJW; Lerner, 1980) enables people to confront their physical and social environment as though they are stable, orderly and controllable. This positively biased description of the world or "positive illusion" (Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996; Taylor & Brown, 1988) acts as a stabilising force that protects individuals from the harsh realities of their realistically unjust world (Lerner, 1980). For example, a large literature has documented that people can be given to blaming and derogating innocent victims in an attempt to preserve their just world beliefs (see Callan & Ellard, 2010; Hafer & Bègue, 2005).

With the aim of measuring individual differences in people's self-reported just world beliefs, Lipkus et al. (1996) formulated two scales to assess the belief that the world is fair to others (BJW-others) and fair to oneself (BJW-self). Lipkus et al. (1996) found that BJW-self, but not BJW-others, was associated with dimensions of subjective well-being, namely decreases in depression and stress and increases in life satisfaction. In contrast, BJW-others, but not BJW-self, is strongly correlated

with social attitudes, such as harsh judgements of disadvantaged people (e.g., Bègue & Bastounis, 2003; Sutton & Douglas, 2005) and a desire for revenge, for example after the September 11th attacks (Kaiser, Vick, & Major, 2004).

According to Dalbert (2001), the BJW-self equips individuals with a conceptual framework that supports their construal of personal experiences of injustice in a meaningful way. Specifically, individuals who strongly endorse the BJW-self tend to "assimilate" unjust experiences to their just world beliefs (e.g. Dalbert, 1997, 1999; Hafer, & Correy, 1999; Lupfer, Doan, & Houston, 1998), for example, by downplaying the injustice itself (Lipkus & Siegler, 1993). People who believe that the world is a just place for themselves show fewer symptoms of depression (Otto, Boos, Dalbert, Schöps, & Hoyer, 2006), reduced insomnia severity (Jensen, Dehlin, Hagberg, Samuelsson, & Svensson, 1998), increased life satisfaction (Dzuka & Dalbert, 2002) and greater purpose in life (Bègue & Bastounis, 2003). BJW-self can be especially helpful for individuals trying to cope with critical life events, such as victims of natural disasters (e.g. Christandl, 2013; Dzuka & Dalbert, 2007; Fatima & Suhail, 2010; Nasser, Doumit, & Carifio, 2011; Otto et al., 2006; Xie, Liu, & Gan, 2011). In sum, the BJW-self functions as an important "personal resource" (Dalbert, 2001) that helps people cope with instances of injustice in their personal lives. Given this, the stronger an individual endorses the BJW-self, the more likely he or she is to experience positive subjective well-being, whether dealing with daily quandaries or extreme adversity.

The BJW-others, by contrast, reflects a greater concern with other people's experiences and therefore does not significantly predict an individual's subjective well-being, but is more reliably associated with social attitudes (e.g. Bègue & Bastounis, 2003; Sutton & Douglas, 2005). BJW-others leads to highly defensive reactions following exposure to injustice, such as seeking vengeance and derogating victims for their fate (e.g. Lucas, Zhdanova, & Alexander, 2011; Strelan & Sutton, 2011; see Hafer & Sutton, in press). In sum, research suggests that the BJW-self is related to subjective well-being, whereas BJW-others is related to harsher social attitudes (Bègue & Bastounis, 2003; Sutton & Douglas, 2005).

Aims of the Study

Refugee workers are confronted with victims of injustice on a daily basis. We aimed to explore the ways that refugee workers' beliefs in a just world are associated with their subjective well-being, as well as their attitudes towards refugees. Although previous research has yet to consider the impact of justice beliefs on well-being and attitudes in this context, related research suggests that BJW-self and BJW-others are distinguished concepts with unique correlates to these concepts, respectively (e.g. Lipkus et al., 1996; Sutton & Douglas, 2005).

We therefore hypothesised that refugee workers with higher BJW-self would report less stress and more life satisfaction (i.e. better subjective well-being) than those with a lower BJW-self. In addition, we hypothesised that refugee workers with a stronger BJW-others would display harsher attitudes and less empathy towards refugees, compared to those with a weaker BJW-others.

Method

Participants

Refugee practitioners ($N = 253$) volunteered to take part via personal contacts and through social networking sites. We also posted the survey on several refugee-related forums (e.g. *Refugee Research Network*, *International Association for the Study of Forced Migration*). This approach allowed us to recruit participants who worked in a range of agencies, including national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs and INGOs), charities, health care settings, community-based organisations (CBOs) and university-affiliated groups. The sample of refugee workers, who were paid workers or volunteers, included legal advisors, psychologists, community support workers, advocates and researchers. Participants were either currently working with refugees or had previous experience in refugee care.

For participants not currently working in refugee care, the median time since they last worked with refugees was 1.08 years. See Table 1 for demographic information about the sample.

Procedure

Participants were presented with an online questionnaire. Participants were told that the study was interested in the subjective well-being of refugee workers and their attitudes towards refugees.

First, participants were presented with the BJW for others scale (Lipkus et al., 1996). The scale comprises eight items aimed at measuring participants' belief that the world, generally, is a just place. For example, "I feel that the world treats people fairly" and "I feel that people earn the rewards and punishments they get" (1 = *strongly agree* to 7 = *strongly disagree*). Next, the BJW for the self scale (Lipkus et al., 1996) was used to measure participants' belief that the world treats themselves justly. The scale includes eight items that are closely matched with the BJW-others scale, in that only pronouns are changed, for example, "I feel that the world treats me fairly" (1 = *strongly agree* to 7 = *strongly disagree*).

We then measured participants' subjective well-being via two scales. Subjective well-being was first assessed using the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen & Williamson, 1988). This 10-item scale measured individuals' self-reported feelings and thoughts during the last month, for example, "In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?" (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*). The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffin, 1985) was also employed to assess life satisfaction. The scale comprised five items designed to capture individuals' subjective appraisals of their lives. For example, "In most ways my life is close to my ideal" and "So far I have gotten the important things I want in life" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*).

Next, we assessed attitudes towards refugees with 12 items, involving both emotional reactions (e.g. hatred and disdain) and evaluative reactions (e.g. disliking

Table 1 Participant demographics

Variable	Sample statistic
Age	
Mean (SD)	33.13 (10.02)
Median	30
Range	20–80
Not reported	13
Gender (%)	
Men	19.8
Women	79.4
Not reported	0.8
Region/continent of origin (%)	
North America	27.3
Europe	45.8
Sub Saharan Africa	7.5
Asia	2.8
Middle East and North Africa	7.7
Central and South America	0.4
Australia and South Pacific	6.3
Not reported	2.2
Currently working with refugees (%)	
Employed	60.9
Not employed	37.9
Unreported	1.2
Time working with refugees (years)	
Mean (SD)	5.40 (5.26)
Not reported	8

and approval; see Stephan, Ybarra, Martínez, Schwarzwald, & Tur-Kaspa, 1998). The wording of statements was adapted to ensure that participants reported attitudes specific to refugees. Sample items included "To what extent do you feel *superior* to the refugees that you work with" and "To what extent do you feel *admiration* towards the refugees that you work with" (reverse-scored). Other evaluations and emotions assessed were *hostility, acceptance, affection, sympathy, rejection* and *warmth*. The response format consisted of a 10-point Likert-type scale ranging from $0 = no$ (e.g., *admiration*) to $9 = extreme$ (e.g. *admiration*). Higher scores indicate more positive evaluations of refugees in general.

A modified version of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983) was used to measure two aspects of empathy: *perspective-taking* (the tendency to adopt another's point of view) and *empathic concern* (other-oriented feelings such as sympathy, warmth and compassion). Items 25 (perspective-taking) and 9 (empathic concern) were excluded in the interest of avoiding repetition and language ambiguity for non-native English speakers. Consequently, the modified scale was

composed of 12 items and were averaged to form as single measure of empathy towards refugees. The wording of statements was slightly modified to ensure that participants' responses were focused on the refugees with whom they work. For example, "I often have tender, concerned feelings for the *refugees I work with*" and "I sometimes try to understand the *refugees I work with* better by imagining how things look from their perspective" (1 = *does not describe me well* to 5 = *describes me very well).* All measures achieved acceptable internal consistency (see Table 2).

Results

The present study examined the correlations among BJW-others, BJW-self, subjective well-being (stress and life satisfaction) and victim rejection (attitudes and empathy). Descriptive statistics and correlations among these measures are presented in Table 2. As hypothesised, BJW-self, but not BJW-others, correlated significantly with our indices of subjective well-being: Participants higher in BJW-self reported less stress and more life satisfaction. The zero-order correlations between BJW-others and our indices of victim rejection were not statistically significant.

Because BJW-self and BJW-others are inherently confounded, it is important to test their unique predictive utility (see Sutton & Winnard, 2007). Our primary analyses, then, concerned testing the unique relation between each BJW scale and our dependent measures while controlling for the other BJW scale. Thus, we ran four multiple regression analyses to test the individual contribution of each BJW measure while controlling for the other BJW measure (see Table 3). These analyses revealed a significant relation between BJW-self and subjective well-being and between BJW-others and attitudes towards refugees. Specifically, BJW-self uniquely predicted stress and life satisfaction over and above BJW-others. Furthermore, our results showed that BJW-others uniquely predicted attitudes towards refugees while controlling for BJW-self, with individuals scoring higher on BJW-others demonstrating less positive attitudes towards refugees. BJW-self, however, *positively* predicted attitudes towards refugees, such that higher BJW-self was related to greater positive attitudes towards refugees while statistically controlling for BJW-others. Therefore, the BJW-self appears to statistically suppress the relation between BJW-others and attitudes towards refugees (and vice versa).[1] Indeed, analyses showed that the indirect effect of BJW-others for attitudes towards refugees (point estimate = .06, SE = .02) had the opposite sign of the total effect (point estimate = −.09, SE = .05), which points to statistical suppression (see

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[1] A reviewer aptly noted the importance of controlling for the number of years the participants worked with refugees in these analyses because refugee workers need to cope with the consequences of their work over time. The number of years working with refugees did not correlate significantly with either BJW-self or BJW-other (rs = −.04 and .001, respectively, ps > .50). Further, controlling for number of years worked with refugees in these regression analyses did not alter our conclusions concerning the predictive utility of BJW-self and BJW-others for subjective well-being and attitudes towards refugees.

Table 2 Means, standard deviation, alpha reliabilities and correlations among the measured variables

Measures	*M* (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. BJW-others	2.63 (1.02)	(.89)					
2. BJW-self	4.58 (.99)	.38**	(.86)				
3. Perceived stress	2.80 (.67)	−.06	−.21**	(.87)			
4. Life satisfaction	5.05 (1.17)	.01	.40**	−.38**	(.84)		
5. Attitudes towards refugees	8.62 (.82)	−.09	.13*	−.12	.14*	(.77)	
6. Empathy	4.16 (.45)	.03	.04	−.01	−.002	.39**	(.68)

Alpha reliabilities are presented along the diagonal

BJW belief in just world

* *p* < 0.05, ** *p* < 0.01

MacKinnon, Krull, & Lockwood, 2000; Rucker, Preacher, Tormala, & Petty, 2011). Neither BJW-self nor BJW-others significantly predicted empathy.

Discussion

The present study examined the relation between the just world beliefs of refugee workers and their subjective well-being and social attitudes towards refugees. Previous work has suggested that BJW-self is an important personal resource that confers psychological benefits (Dalbert, 1999, 2001; Lipkus et al., 1996; Sutton & Douglas, 2005), whereas BJW-others is more strongly related to harsher social attitudes towards victims of injustice (Lipkus et al., 1996; Sutton & Douglas, 2005). Extending this research to the domain of refugee workers, we hypothesised that BJW-self would correlate with the subjective well-being of refugee workers and that BJW-others would relate to lower empathy and harsher attitudes towards refugees. These hypotheses were largely supported by our data, which demonstrated that refugee workers with higher BJW-self reported feeling less stressed and more satisfied with life than workers with lower BJW-self. However, those with a strong BJW-others displayed less positive attitudes towards refugees, when BJW-self was controlled for, than individuals with a lower endorsement of BJW-others.

This study supports the idea that a belief in a just world for the self functions as a healthy coping mechanism that helps to mitigate adverse health effects and promote better subjective well-being (e.g. Dalbert, 2001; Otto et al., 2006). As such, refugee workers who strongly believe that their own world is just may be protected from various deleterious effects of refugee work. However, the precise mechanisms through which a self-reported belief in a just world for the self fosters subjective well-being (lower stress and greater life satisfaction) in the context of refugee work has yet to be delineated. One possibility is that believing in a just world for the self contributes to well-being among refugee workers because it is related to adaptive cognitive appraisals of the stressors associated with their work (cf. Tomaka & Blascovich, 1994; see also Dalbert, 2001, for an in-depth discussion of the functions of believing in a just world).

Table 3 Summary of multiple regression analyses predicting stress, life satisfaction, attitudes towards refugees and empathy as a function of self-reported beliefs in a just world (BJW)

Predictor variables	Perceived stress			Life satisfaction			Attitudes towards refugees			Empathy for refugees		
	b	SE	β	b	SE	β	b	SE	β	b	SE	β
1. BJW-others	.027	.044	.040	−.181	.072	−.156*	−.150	.055	−.182**	.003	.031	.006
2. BJW-self	−.152	.045	−.228**	.532	.073	.454**	.161	.056	.192**	.018	.031	.040

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Against a backdrop of generally very positive attitudes towards refugees, the present findings also demonstrated that refugee workers with higher BJW-others showed less positive attitudes towards refugees while controlling for BJW-self. These findings underscore (a) the importance of taking into account the inherent confound between BJW-self and BJW-others in terms of their predictive utility and (b) that even human rights oriented individuals, such as refugee workers, might devalue innocent victims.

Limitations and Further Research

We measured empathy as an additional way to assess participants' views of refugees beyond attitudes; however, we did not observe the expected negative relation between BJW-others and empathy. A possible explanation for this was the use of a modified version of the IRI to measure empathy. In the interest of brevity and to ensure all sample items would be culturally relevant and easily understood, we removed two of the four subscales (i.e. personal distress and fantasy) and changed the wordings of some items. As such, future studies might consider administering the intact IRI with all four subscales to ensure a reliable measure of empathy when considering the predictive value of BJW-others. Moreover, because we employed general measures of subjective well-being (perceived stress and satisfaction with life), the relation between BJW-self and for example, stressors associated with working with refugees is unknown and open to further investigation.

We can also only speculate about the causal direction of associations with just world beliefs and subjective well-being and social attitudes because of the cross-sectional nature of our design. Thus, we cannot rule out the possibility that the correlations we observed are being driven by third variables, or that, for example, lower subjective well-being might lead to lower BJW-self. Longitudinal studies that examine how just world beliefs among refugee workers impact subjective well-being and attitudes towards refugees over time and circumstance are necessary before causal relations can be delineated. To this end, despite BJW being widely considered as an individual disposition that is largely stable over time (Rubin & Peplau, 1973, 1975), research suggests that instances of injustice can impact BJW at a certain threshold of adversity. For example, Dzuka and Dalbert (2007) showed that the BJW-self of teachers was lowered when they experienced high levels of violence from students. The challenge for future research is to consider under what conditions, if any, the BJW-self and BJW-others of refugee workers might be compromised and further to explore the psychological and social consequences of such a shift taking place.

Finally, future research should consider investigating the role that justice beliefs play in the lives of refugees themselves. Research has demonstrated that believing in a personally just world can support victims to cope with critical life events such as natural disasters (Otto et al., 2006; Xie et al., 2011) and birth defects (e.g. Fatima & Suhail, 2010). In contrast, Wu et al. (2010) found that individuals from a collectivistic culture who had suffered trauma maintained a higher general BJW rather than a more personal BJW. Future studies might investigate whether the

psychological benefits conferred by believing in a personally just world are also observed within refugee populations.

Conclusions

By extending previous research on beliefs in a just world to the domain of refugee work, our findings reveal that beliefs in a just world for the self is related to the greater well-being of refugee workers. In addition, a greater belief in a just world for others correlated with less positive social attitudes towards the people refugee workers are aiming to help.

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