



Some Comments on Justice and Democracy

Claudia Dalbert¹

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Abstract

In this brief comment, the erosion of democracy will be analyzed from a justice motive perspective. Justice motive theory can help us to better understand the underlying processes that explain why this occurs. Moreover, justice motive theory provides us with hints about what can help stop this erosive process and to strengthen democracy. A key element is people's feeling of being treated justly by others because this strengthens their motivation to behave justly by themselves, to invest in their own future, and to avoid rule-breaking, deviant behavior. Thus, politicians should take care that citizens feel treated justly. Consequently, it is a challenge for politicians to safeguard the transparency of the information base and the trade-off leading to a specific decision. Particularly when conflicts are expected, politicians should give voice to *all* parties affected by the decision to increase the likelihood that a decision will be a democratic one in the true sense, a decision in the interest of all citizens affected by it.

Keywords Justice · Justice motive · Belief in a just world · Democracy · Participation

In this brief comment, I will bring to together the justice motive theory (for an overview see, e.g., Dalbert, 2001, 2012; Dalbert & Donat, 2015) and my political experiences as Minister for Environment, Agriculture, and Energy in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany (2016–2021), along with readers' comments on my research.

Psychological Background

The justice motive theory is a development based on the just world hypothesis (e.g., Lerner & Miller, 1978). The just world hypothesis states that people need to believe in a just world in which *everyone* gets what they deserve and deserves what they get. Thus, when individuals with a strong just world belief experience an injustice that

✉ Claudia Dalbert
cd@leibniz-psychology.org

¹ Director of the Leibniz Institute for Psychology, Universitätsring 15, D-54296 Trier, Germany

they do not believe can be resolved in reality, they try to assimilate the experience to their just world belief. This can be done, for example, by blaming the victim of the observed injustice, by justifying the experienced injustice as being at least partly self-inflicted, or by playing down the injustice.

The justice motive theory states that a personal just world belief can be differentiated from the general belief in a just world and that particularly this belief in a personal just world can be seen as an indication of an implicit justice motive. The assimilation function as described above for the general belief in a just world is true as well for the personal belief in a just world. The more people believe in a personal just world, the more they are motivated to assimilate experienced injustices to their belief. These mechanisms explain the positive relationships that have been observed between the belief in a just world and justice judgments. For example, school students with a strong belief in a personal just world have been found to be more likely to evaluate their school grades and the behavior of their teachers, peers, and parents towards them as just. Similarly, research has shown that prisoners with a strong personal just world belief are more likely to evaluate the justice of the legal proceedings leading to their conviction, their treatment by prison officers, and the decisions that are made on prison affairs as more just.

Notice, however, that justice and injustice in this research and in this comment means people's subjective experiences and not a normative or philosophical criterion.

The personal belief in a just world not only explains the need to cognitively restore reality as though it were just. In addition, the personal belief in a just world indicates the need of people to strive for justice themselves. They do so when they think that justice can be adequately restored in reality. For example, it has been shown that the belief in a personal just world is associated with social responsibility and the commitment to use just means and, conversely, with rule-breaking behavior as delinquent and cheating behavior or bullying behavior, both offline and online. This is why the personal belief in a just world can be seen as an indicator of an implicit justice motive.

The belief in a personal just world enables people to deal with their social environment as though it were stable and orderly and thus increases the trust in being treated justly by others. Research has supported the expected positive association of the personal just world belief with general interpersonal trust and trust in societal institutions. Consequently, the personal belief in a just world enables individuals to rely on their good deeds being rewarded at some point in the future. The certitude that a person will ultimately get what s/he deserves encourages individuals to invest in their future. In contrast, those who do not believe in a personal just world doubt the value of such an investment, because its pay-off is uncertain. Studies have shown that the personal just world belief is positively associated with the confidence that personal goals will be attained. Individuals with a strong belief in a just world show more trust in their future and in others' behavior toward them. Accordingly, they expect to be confronted with just tasks in achievement situations and their efforts to be justly rewarded. As studies have shown, they can thus be expected to feel less threatened and more challenged by the need to achieve, to experience fewer negative emotions, and to achieve better results.

Notice, however, that I am speaking here about an *implicit* justice motive that is triggered by justice-relevant clues, operates on an intuitive level outside subjective awareness, and is particularly relevant in explaining intuitive justice-specific reactions. This implicit justice motive can be differentiated from an *explicit* or self-attributed justice motive that is part of the self-concept, is triggered by social clues, and better explains controlled reactions. The explicit justice motive is satisfied and reinforced by social reactions and the confirmation of the self-concept, whereas the implicit justice motive is satisfied by experienced justice in itself (Dalbert, 2012).

Being treated justly by another person, a group, an institution, or even a society indicates that an individual is a valued member of this entity and thus deserves to be treated justly. What does that mean in the reverse case? Being treated unjustly indicates that a person is not a valuable member of this entity, that s/he must live in uncertainty, that s/he cannot count on just treatment and just challenges. In addition, experienced injustice results in feelings of exclusion—the feeling not being an integrated part of a particular group as, for example, the school class, the family, the working group, or even the society as a whole. Feelings of exclusion weaken the belief in a personal just world and thus the trust in being treated justly. A vicious circle develops. Consequently, those who feel treated unjustly by their group do not feel the need to follow the rules of the group and to behave justly toward others. Permanent or repeated injustice experiences lead to embitterment and/or deviant behavior. Permanent injustice experiences can also increase the likelihood of despaired actions to protect at least one's feeling of having options to take action. In sum, the feeling of being treated unjustly has negative consequences not only for individuals themselves, but for the society as a whole.

Political Consequences

Democracy is a political model that should fit well into the justice motive theory. The word democracy comes from the Greek words “*demos*”, meaning people, and “*kratos*”, meaning power; so democracy can be thought of as “power of the people”: a way of governing which depends on the will of the people (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/democracy#>). A core idea of democracy is that the government rules on behalf of *all* the people, according to their “will”. Properly understood, democracy should not be “rule of the majority,” if that means that minorities’ interests are ignored completely. Thus, theoretically, in a democracy, all people should feel treated justly and should perceive themselves as a valuable member of the society. However, people often develop the feeling that politicians do not care about them and that the society is not just to them. As justice motive theory describes, these feelings toward society are often accompanied by a decreasing obligation to follow the rules, a weakening belief that investments in the future will be rewarded, and decreasing subjective well-being, that in the long run manifest perhaps even as psychiatric symptoms such as embitterment.

Because of the tremendous negative consequences of injustice experiences for society, politicians should make it a top priority to care for justice, they should strive

to provide people with a society in which they feel justly treated. The question thus arises of what must politicians care for to reinforce people's feeling of justice.

Transparency is a key issue. When people better understand the backgrounds underlying decisions, it is more likely that they will experience the decision as just. In this vein, it is important to understand the information on which a decision is based. In our multimedia society, this is not an easy task. Most of the time people are overwhelmed by a flood of information. Serious and true information and science-based information are intermingled with rumors, misinformation, and lies. Often it is hard for people to differentiate between them. I personally cannot count how often in the last years I have heard comments like "It is true, I read it on the internet." Every effort to clarify for people what is trustworthy information and what isn't is helpful in this regard.

Usually, decisions are made after weighting up at least two possibilities. This trade-off must be made transparent. What are the consequences of a decision for specific members of the society? Are there different short-term compared to long-term consequences? Why are the needs of one group ultimately placed higher than the needs of other groups? And so on ... The better people understand the alternatives and their consequences as well as their weighting, the more likely the decision is experienced as just.

In fact, I am convinced that answering these questions would be helpful as well for the politicians themselves *before* deciding. Often political decisions are not the consequences of a rational trade-off process. Many times, such decisions are based on gut instinct, assuming what is important or what people, the electorate, or sometimes your own voters, want in the end. Sometimes this is the case because political decisions are—more often than not—complex and people like and even need ways of reducing complexity. Stopping a rational trade-off process and following one's gut feelings is one way to reduce experienced complexity. If politicians would provide for transparency in the trade-off process, they would as well be more inclined to notice when they are in danger of abandoning the public interest. Furthermore, such opaque decision making is at risk of being seen as unjust by many people.

In sum, it is fundamental to explain why political decisions are made in this way and not in the contrary. People only accept decisions concerning themselves and being to their disadvantage when they understand the reasoning behind these decisions. But even an absolute transparent decision as described above cannot guarantee that most of the people will experience this decision as just.

Transparency in this regard is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for just decisions. The other important fundament for political acceptance is to give people voice, to find out what they care for, to understand what their thoughts are, and to seriously consider their wishes regarding the direction a decision or a choice should take. This becomes even more important in situations in which democratic elections result in multi-party coalitions, meaning that most people do not see their electoral choice well represented in governmental decisions.

It is important to note that giving voice is not satisfied by opinion polls. In addition, giving voice cannot be replaced by expert reports or consultant recommendations. Giving voice is a process of mutual understanding for all parties affected by the decision. In this sense, it is a working process involving both the politicians

and the people. Furthermore, this process is only helpful if *all* parties involved are included. A process in which only selected parties are included, perhaps only those parties supporting a specific solution, would result in the contrary. People would be reinforced in their negative view on politics, for example, that politicians are manipulative and do not care for their interests.

Practical Implications

By designing opportunities for such a process, one can draw on the vast experience of mediation and conflict resolution techniques. A political example in this vein is the Bürgerrat Klima (an assembly of citizens focusing on climate; see <https://buergerrat-klima.de/english-information>). Another political example comes from flood protection in Saxony-Anhalt. During my term as minister in Saxony-Anhalt, we dissolved more than 20 years of stagnation regarding flood protection along the Selke river by means of what we called a Round Table, a process which followed the guidelines outlined below. Within one year this process culminated in a binding contract signed by all parties involved. This contract describes the measures to be taken to protect against flooding of the Selke, and it was accepted by all parties. This implies that other measures will not be implemented and that the agreed-upon compromise will not be questioned. After the contract was signed, the Round Table is accompanying the realization of the contract, which is a valuable additional step to deepen the public trust in the political decision that was made.

Whenever possible, such a process should ideally take place in person and not via video conference. This is important to not further deepen the digital divide. In addition, in-person meetings better enable the process of mutual understanding and mutual trust.

In a first step, all parties involved must develop common ground in terms of information. This takes time and effort. At the same time, all parties must make an effort to understand the other parties, their views, and what is important for them. This is not an easy process, and it may be helpful if it is led by an experienced chairperson. However, I would like to emphasize that the chairperson should not influence the decision itself but should only be responsible for the process leading to the decision. Moreover, I have had positive experiences with this type of process in a confidential setting, experiencing firsthand that the working process—the development of mutual understanding and confidence in each other—has time to grow.

From the outset it must be clear to all participants that this effortful process is a serious and binding one. The seriousness of the process is underlined by ceasing all (irreversible) activities connected to the topic of the process for its duration. Additionally, this working process should have a binding time frame and, in the end, a written consent signed by all parties. This process of giving voice can virtually be applied to all political domains and on all political levels. For practical reasons, however, this is utopic. Therefore, it should at least be applied for solving conflicts or for domains where conflicts are expected.

Nowadays, we often hear complaints, at least in Germany, that decisions must be made more quickly and implementation processes must become faster. In this

vein, we also often hear the idea of accelerating these processes by reducing people's possibilities to intervene in such processes. I'm convinced that the contrary is true. If people are not given voice within the process, legal measures remain their only opportunity for action. Very often, taking legal measures requires more time than what was "saved" by reducing the possibilities of people's intervention. Additionally, dealing with legal measures such as a lawsuit is often more expensive for the state in terms of time and money than properly giving voice to their citizens would be. Even more important, the reduction of citizen participation in such processes weakens citizens' implicit justice motive. Consequently, their trust in justice imparted by the society and consequently their implicit obligation to behave justly by themselves will be reduced. In addition, their willingness to invest in their own future will decrease. In sum, at least on (presumably) conflicting topics, all efforts should be made that all parties are given voice to ensure that a decision is made that will be experienced as just.

Conclusions

Nowadays, we are observing an erosion of democracy with aversive consequences for everyone, including reduced subjective well-being, increasing deviant behavior, and growing fascism. Justice motive theory can help us to better understand the underlying processes that explain why this occurs. Moreover, justice motive theory provides us with hints about what can help stop this erosive process and to strengthen democracy. A key element is people's feeling of being treated justly by others because this strengthens their motivation to behave justly by themselves, to invest in their own future, and to avoid rule-breaking, deviant behavior.

The challenge for politicians is to safeguard the transparency of the information base and the trade-off leading to a specific decision. Particularly when conflicts are expected, politicians should give voice to *all* parties affected by the decision to increase the likelihood that a decision will be a democratic one in the true sense, a decision in the interest of all citizens.

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Declarations

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