

Belief in a Just World: How Our Perceptions Impact Our Judgments

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Abstract

This study examined participants' beliefs in a just world and how these beliefs affect their perceptions. Participants' beliefs in a just world were measured by the Global Belief in a Just World Scale (Lipkus, 1991). Participants, 80 males and 81 females, read a description of a fictitious carjacking where the victim was described as either resisting the attacker or not. Participants rated the deservingness and responsibility of the victim and the responsibility of the attacker. As predicted, participants in the resistance condition, and males, rated the victim more responsible and deserving. Contrary to prediction, neither participants in the no resistance condition nor females rated the attacker more responsible. The results are discussed within the Just World Theory (Lerner, 1980).

Belief in a Just World: How Our Perceptions are Affected

The recent growth in the study of crime has led many researchers to examine the role of the victim in various crime situations. One of the results of this trend has been a tendency to blame apparently innocent victims (Blumberg & Lester, 1991). A great deal of research suggests that individual perceptions of rape, violence, and other forms of attack are colored by a person's own attitudes (Cowan & Curtis, 1994). However, many other factors, such as characteristics of the victim and gender, play a central role in who gets held responsible in the midst of unfortunate circumstances.

For example, a study by Daugherty and Esper (1998) investigated the issue of belief in a just world and how these beliefs affect attributions of blame. The researchers predicted that participants who believe in a just world would assign victims more responsibility than participants who do not believe that the world is just. All participants were given a Global Belief in a Just World Scale (Lipkus, 1991) and a scenario to read about a victim who was arrested while running away from a fight at a local bar. The victim, described as either having been arrested previously or having never been arrested, was placed in jail. Another inmate later raped the victim. The participants were then given the opportunity to rate how responsible the victim was for the incident. The results showed that participants whose scores indicated a greater belief in a just world assigned more responsibility to the victim regardless of the victim's prior arrest record. The researchers concluded that belief in a just world is indicative of greater victim blame.

Connors and Heaven (1990) also investigated how certain characteristics of an observer, such as belief in a just world, affect how victims are judged. Based on the Just World Theory, (Lerner, 1980) which implies that you get what you deserve in life, the researchers hypothesized that participants believing in a just world would hold the victim more responsible than

participants who did not. Participants were given a Belief in a Just World Scale (Lipkus, 1991) as well as a scale measuring their attitudes toward AIDS sufferers. The results showed that participants' scores on the Just World Scale (Lipkus) were positively correlated with negative attitudes toward AIDS sufferers. Thus, participants who felt that the world was just and fair were more likely to blame individuals for contracting AIDS regardless of how they contracted the disease.

An additional finding from the previous study by Connors and Heaven (1990) was that there were gender differences in the way the AIDS victims were viewed. Specifically, males were more likely than females to rate the AIDS victims as responsible and deserving. Males also showed less empathy, less concern, and more social distance toward the AIDS victims. Females rated the victims more positively and showed more concern. The researchers concluded that males are less likely than females to sympathize with an AIDS victim and more likely to blame the victim.

Many studies do in fact support the finding that males are more likely to blame the victim of unfortunate circumstances. For example, Blumberg and Lester (1991) investigated high school and college students' attitudes toward rape. Participants were given a rape myth acceptance scale and eleven brief rape scenarios. The researchers found that males blamed the victims more than females did regardless of the scenario.

Another important factor in assigning blame involves certain aspects of the victim. A study by Krahe (1988) investigated whether or not a victim's pre-rape behavior played a role in the blaming of an apparently innocent rape victim. Participants were presented with various rape scenarios in which the victim's pre-rape behavior was manipulated. Participants were then asked to attribute responsibility to both the victim and the attacker. The results showed that rape

victims who had violated certain social norms, behaviors or activities that are thought to breach the appropriate conduct of a victim, were rated as more responsible. Thus, victims who did not react in the appropriate way, such as fighting back, or who were seen as precipitating the incident, possibly by inviting a stranger in to her apartment, were blamed more than victims seen as behaving in socially appropriate ways.

In addition to affecting how much he or she is blamed for the incident, a victim's behavior also influences how the assailant is viewed. A study by Branscombe, Owen, Garstka, and Coleman (1996) examined the factors that affect how responsibility and blame are determined within rape incidences. Participants read the description of various rape vignettes and were asked to assign responsibility to the victim and the attacker. Participants were also asked to determine whether the victim could have taken an alternative course of action that could have possibly changed the outcome. The results showed that when a different course of action, a counterfactual, existed which may have prevented the incident, the victim was assigned more blame than the attacker. However, when there was no other alternative course of action, or counterfactual, to take, the attacker was assigned most of the responsibility.

The purpose of this study was to examine further the relationship between belief in a just world and how these beliefs affect judgments and perceptions. The participants, college undergraduates, read one of two carjacking scenarios where the victim either resisted the attacker or offered no resistance. After reading the scenario, participants completed a questionnaire in which they rated the responsibility and deservingness of the victim as well as the responsibility of the attacker. Participants then completed a Global Belief in a Just World Scale (Lipkus, 1991) that measured the extent to which they believe that the world is a just place. A main effect for the victim's amount of resistance toward the attacker was predicted based on the findings of

Branscombe et al. (1996) that when a victim could have altered his or her behavior and changed the outcome of the situation, more blame was assigned to the victim and less blame was assigned to the attacker. That is, I predicted that participants reading the scenario where the victim resisted the attacker would rate the victim more responsible and deserving but rate the attacker less responsible than would participants reading the scenario in which the victim offered no resistance. Based on the findings of Connors and Heaven (1990) that males rated AIDS victims more responsible while females tended to take the side of the victim, a main effect for participant sex was predicted. Specifically, I predicted that males would rate the victim more responsible and deserving but females would rate the attacker more responsible.

Method

Research Design

This experiment was based on a 2 x 2 between-subjects design with independent variables being the victim's amount of resistance to the attacker (resistance or no resistance) and participant sex (male or female). The participants' ratings of victim responsibility, victim deservingness, and attacker responsibility were the dependent variables.

Participants

The participants were 80 male and 81 female undergraduate students haphazardly selected from Valdosta State University. They received no compensation for their participation. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 48 with a mean age of 21.95 and a standard deviation of 4.74. The ethnic background of the sample was 50.3% White, 44.1% African American, 1.9% Hispanic, and 3.7% from other ethnic backgrounds. Male participants were randomly assigned to read about a carjacking victim who resisted his attacker ($n = 43$) or a carjacking victim who offered no resistance to his attacker ($n = 37$). Female participants were randomly assigned to read

about a carjacking victim who resisted his attacker ($n = 41$) or a carjacking victim who offered no resistance ($n = 41$). There were 11 participants excluded because they failed the manipulation question. The exclusions were not related to the manipulation of resistance as five participants were in the no resistance condition and six were in the resistance condition. All participants were treated in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 1992).

Materials

Participants' beliefs in a just world were measured by the seven item Global Belief in a Just World Scale (Lipkus, 1991). The scale was designed to measure the degree in which individuals believe that the world is a just place, (e.g., "I basically feel that the world is a fair place") where bad things do not happen to good people (e.g., "I feel that people who meet with misfortune have brought it on themselves"). Participants responded to each statement on a six point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). All items on the scale were worded so as to reflect a positive belief in a just world. Higher scores were indicative of a greater belief in a just world. Past research has reported the reliability of the scale to range from .56 (Whatley & Riggio, 1993) to .83 (Lipkus, 1991). A reliability analysis conducted on the seven-item scale for the present study resulted in a reliability coefficient of .76.

Procedure

I approached a student and asked if he or she would participate in an experiment attempting to investigate the perceptual skills of people. All students who were approached were told that the study was for an experimental psychology class. If the student refused, then he or she was thanked and not bothered further. If the student agreed, then he or she was given a brief carjacking scenario, a questionnaire, and a seven item scale. The participant was then asked to

follow the instructions on the cover page. Each participant completed the experiment individually.

Instructions to participants. Each participant read the instructions typed on the front cover page of the booklet. The participants read about an attempt to examine the perceptual skills of people. They also read that they would be asked to answer a seven item scale, read a brief scenario of a carjacking, and then make judgments about the people and/or events that occurred. Participants then read that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions and their answers would be anonymous. The instructions also stated that the scenario should be read carefully and that referring back to the scenario was not allowed.

Description of the carjacking. The second page of the booklet contained a fictional account of a carjacking incident. The scenario described a Friday night in which a 19-year-old male college student, named Jim, went to a local pool hall to meet some friends. Upon arrival, he called his friends outside to look at his new car. The car had several expensive features such as chrome wheels and a sound system. On the way home that night, the young man noticed another car following him at a close distance. While stopped at a red light, a voice shouted at Jim that his car was leaking gas. After getting out of the car to check for leaking gas, Jim was approached by a man who pulled a gun and demanded the keys to the car. The gun was fired and the bullet hit Jim in the left shoulder, severing a nerve. Jim later learned that he would have only limited use of his shoulder the rest of his life. All participants read the same account of the crime.

Manipulation of the victim's amount of resistance. The independent variable, amount of resistance, was manipulated by varying the response of the victim to the attacker. In the resistance condition, Jim rushed the attacker as he was handing over the keys to the car. The two struggled; the attacker's gun went off and shot Jim in his shoulder. In the no resistance condition,

Jim did as he was told and handed over the keys. Seconds later, the attacker shot him in the shoulder.

Dependent measures. After reading the scenario, each participant completed the questionnaire regarding his or her judgments about the carjacking scenario. The questionnaire measured participants' attitudes about the responsibility and deservingness of the victim as well as the responsibility of the attacker. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate how responsible the victim was for being shot. Responsibility was rated on a nine point scale from 1 (*not very responsible*) to 9 (*very responsible*). Participants were then asked to specify how strongly they believed that the victim deserved what he got. Deservingness was rated on a nine point scale from 1 (*not very strongly*) to 9 (*very strongly*). Each participant was also asked to rate the responsibility of the attacker for shooting the victim. Attacker responsibility was rated on a nine point scale from 1 (*not very responsible*) to 9 (*very responsible*). The questionnaire also contained demographic questions and filler items concerning how often participants believe carjacking occurs and how likely carjacking victims are to be physically assaulted. After participants completed the questionnaire, they were given the Global Belief in a Just World Scale (Lipkus, 1991).

Manipulation. The participants were also asked to rate how aggressive the victim's behavior was toward the attacker, using a nine point scale to check the effectiveness of the manipulation, from 1 (*not at all aggressive*) to 9 (*very aggressive*).

Debriefing. Upon completion of the experiment, the participants were told the true purpose of the study and allowed to ask questions. Also, the participants were instructed on how to obtain the results of the study.

Results

The effect size r was calculated for all appropriate analyses (Rosenthal, 1991). Alpha levels between .06 and .10 are evaluated as marginally significant.

Manipulation Check on Aggression Ratings

A 2 (amount of resistance) x 2 (participant sex) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated on ratings of Jim's aggressiveness toward the attackers to check on the effectiveness of the manipulation. There was a significant main effect for amount of resistance, $F(1, 157) = 837.82, p < .001 (r = .92)$. Participants who read the scenario where the victim showed aggression toward his attacker rated his behavior as more aggressive ($M = 7.23, SD = 1.41$) than participants who read the scenario where the victim showed no aggression ($M = 1.56, SD = 1.01$). There was no significant main effect for participant sex, $F(1, 157) = 0.21, p = .924 (r = .04)$. There was no significant interaction for Amount of Resistance x Participant Sex, $F(1, 157) = 0.01, p = .991 (r = .01)$.

Ratings of Victim Responsibility

A 2 x 2 ANOVA was calculated on participants' ratings of victim responsibility. There was a significant main effect for amount of resistance, $F(1, 157) = 45.44, p = .002 (r = .47)$. Participants who read the scenario where the victim showed aggression toward the attacker rated the victim more responsible ($M = 5.32, SD = 2.50$) than participants who read the scenario where the victim showed no aggression ($M = 2.78, SD = 2.33$). There was also a significant main effect for participant sex, $F(1, 157) = 9.29, p = .031 (r = .24)$. Male participants rated the victim more responsible ($M = 4.70, SD = 2.65$) than did female participants ($M = 3.52, SD = 2.70$). There was a marginally significant interaction for Amount of Resistance x Participant Sex, $F(1, 157) = 3.03,$

$p = .082$ ($r = .14$). As can be seen in Figure 1, in both conditions males rated the victim more responsible than did females.

Ratings of Victim Deservingness

A 2 x 2 ANOVA was calculated on participants' ratings of victim deservingness. There was a significant main effect for amount of resistance, $F(1, 157) = 9.19, p < .030$ ($r = .24$). In general, participants reading the scenario where the victim resisted the attacker rated the victim more deserving ($M = 2.67, SD = 2.07$) than participants reading the scenario where the victim did not resist the attacker ($M = 1.81, SD = 1.39$). There was no significant main effect for participant sex, $F(1, 157) = 1.29, p = .149$ ($r = .09$). There was no significant interaction for Amount of Resistance x Participant Sex, $F(1, 157) = 0.33, p = .875$ ($r = .05$).

Ratings of Attacker Responsibility

A 2 x 2 ANOVA was calculated on participants' ratings of attacker responsibility. There were no significant main effects for amount of resistance, $F(1, 157) = 0.00, p = 1.00$ ($r = .00$) or participant sex, $F(1, 157) = 0.98, p = .884$ ($r = .08$). The Amount of Resistance x Participant Sex interaction was not significant, $F(1, 157) = 0.07, p = .991$ ($r = .02$).

Just World Correlations

A bivariate correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between participants' just world beliefs and the dependent variables. The results of the analysis indicated that participants' just world beliefs were not significantly correlated with victim responsibility [$r(84) = -.08, p = .217$], victim deservingness [$r(84) = .07, p = .218$], or carjacker responsibility [$r(84) = -.21, p = .108$].

Discussion

The results from the present study supported the predictions that participants in the resistance condition would rate the victim more responsible and deserving than would the participants in the no resistance condition. In general, participants reading the scenario in which the victim resisted the attacker rated the victim higher in responsibility and deservingness. Past research supports this finding. Krahe (1988) found that victims who appear to have violated certain societal codes of victim conduct are held more responsible by uninvolved observers. When the rape victims in the Krahe study did not respond in socially appropriate ways, such as fighting back or yelling for help, the victims were blamed more by participants. Participants in the present study may have used the same thought processes to assign responsibility. Society often teaches that when an individual is being robbed, especially by someone with a gun, he or she should comply with the attacker's requests in order to avoid harm. Thus, participants in the present study who read the scenario in which the victim fought back against his attacker may have felt that the victim's reaction was a violation of appropriate victim behavior, thus warranting a tragic outcome.

However, the results did not support the prediction that participants in the resistance condition would rate the attacker less responsible than participants in the no resistance condition. In general, there were no differences in ratings of attacker responsibility between the resistance and no resistance conditions. Conversely, Branscombe et al. (1996) found that when an alternative course of action by a victim may have possibly changed the outcome of a rape, attackers were rated less responsible than when there was nothing that the victim could do to change the outcome.

The failure of the present study to support the findings of Branscombe et al. (1996) may have stemmed from the possibility that participants in the present study did not interpret the scenario in terms of counterfactuals. That is, participants in the resistance condition may not have considered alternatives to the victim's behavior. Participants may not be as inclined to generate counterfactuals if they are not specifically asked to.

The prediction that males would rate the victim as more responsible and deserving was supported by this study. Males rated the victim more responsible and more deserving than did females. Past research supports these findings. Connors and Heaven (1990) found that males rated AIDS victims more responsible and deserving regardless of how the victims contracted the disease. In addition, Blumberg and Lester (1991) found that males, more so than females, rated the victims of various rape vignettes responsible.

The results from this study did not support the prediction that females would rate the attacker more responsible. Male and female participants in the present study did not differ in their ratings of attacker responsibility. Contrary to this finding, past research suggests that females are more likely to side with the victim and oppose the attacker. For example, Blumberg and Lester (1991) found that females demonstrated more pro-victim judgments.

What could cause the discrepancy between the findings of the present study and past research on attacker responsibility? Perhaps a carjacking is not viewed as damaging of a plight as AIDS or rape. Thus, females may not have sided quite as much with the carjacking victim and may not have opposed the attacker as strongly.

One possible explanation for the results obtained in this study is Lerner's (1980) Belief in a Just World, whereby people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. This theory further asserts that observers believe a person who is viewed as "good" or "kind" warrants

certain favorable outcomes and a person viewed as “bad” or “stupid” warrants unfavorable outcomes. Accordingly, people will blame the victim in order to ensure that such an event could never happen to “good” people such as themselves, that is, bad things do not happen to good people. Blaming a victim may be an outlet through which people can exert some form of control over an unpredictable world.

However, the results of the study showed that there were no significant correlations between belief in a just world and ratings of victim responsibility, victim deservingness, and attacker responsibility. These findings may represent a dent in the Just World Theory (Lerner, 1980). Belief in a just world may only affect perception in certain situations and may not be as strong of an influence on judgment as once thought. However, further research is warranted to explore more specifically when and how belief in a just world influences our attitudes about the world.

The results from the study demonstrated that there is the possibility that when a victim’s actions do not comply with the socially approved role, the victim may be rated more responsible and deserving. In other words, when a victim does not respond to a rape or an attack in ways that society instructs, the individual may be blamed more even if apparently innocent. This finding may have further implications within our society. People who are raped, robbed, or attacked may be less likely to come forward and get help if they fear being held responsible. This may especially be the case if the victim engaged in drinking, fighting, or some other violation of social norms, or did not fight back enough or yell for help. The seriousness of this possibility lies within the fact that any emergency situation, in which there is a victim, needs immediate attention. Any delay may thwart the possibility of fully helping the victim or bringing the perpetrator to justice.

Although victim blame and responsibility appear to be higher for victims who are thought to have brought the unfortunate circumstances upon themselves, these findings may not replicate to other populations. For this reason, caution should be used while interpreting these findings. For example, the victim in the present study was male. People may view the attack of a female as more out of her control. That is, males are more associated with violence than females in our society. Thus, male victims may be expected to handle violent situations more efficiently than females. When a male fights back, observers may view that response as childish or dim-witted. However, when a female fights back, observers may believe that retaliation was her only choice.

Another reason why these findings may not generalize to other populations lies in the fact that different sections of the United States view violence differently. Specifically, anthropologists have described the western and southern regions of the United States as having cultures of honor (Baron & Byrne, 2000). People in these areas have supposedly passed down various social norms condoning violence as a way to defend one's honor and retaliate against a perpetrator (Baron & Byrne, 2000). Thus, people living in these areas may be less likely to blame a victim who fights back. However, the results from this study, obtained from participants living in the South, did not appear to reflect the responses of individuals living in a culture of honor, as the victim who retaliated against the attacker was rated more responsible and deserving.

Future research may want to examine more precisely the specific aspects of a victim that lead to higher ratings of responsibility and deservingness. These additional aspects may include age, sex, or socioeconomic status. Further research may want to explore more specifically the characteristics or situations that lead to attacker blame. In addition, further research might examine if believing in a just world only extends to certain types of circumstances or victims.

For example, despite believing in a just world, an individual may not view a young child who is the victim of violence in the same way that he views an adult who has been the victim of violence.

For the most part, we are all fueled by an intense desire to understand our world (Baron & Byrne, 2000). With the rapid growth of crime, AIDS, and violence in our society with each passing year, understanding the world around us may soon become a means of survival. In the midst of an ever-changing society, we never know when we, or someone we love, will fall prey to some tragedy. Times such as these demand that we fully comprehend why certain victims are blamed more and why individual perceptions of victims differ. Belief in a just world may color individual perceptions. A victim's violation of certain standards of conduct may also play an enormous role. Despite the many factors that may or may not influence our attitudes and perceptions, one thing is clear; further research is needed to delve to the bottom of this social phenomena. The road to a better understanding may seem long and vague, but the possible benefits for suffering victims have never been more clear.

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Table 1

Participants Mean Ratings of Victim Responsibility as a Function of Amount of Resistance and

Participant Sex

Participant Sex	Amount of Resistance	
	Resistance	No Resistance
Male		
<i>n</i>	43	37
<i>M</i>	5.56	3.70
<i>SD</i>	2.21	2.79
Female		
<i>n</i>	41	40
<i>M</i>	5.07	1.93
<i>SD</i>	2.79	1.37

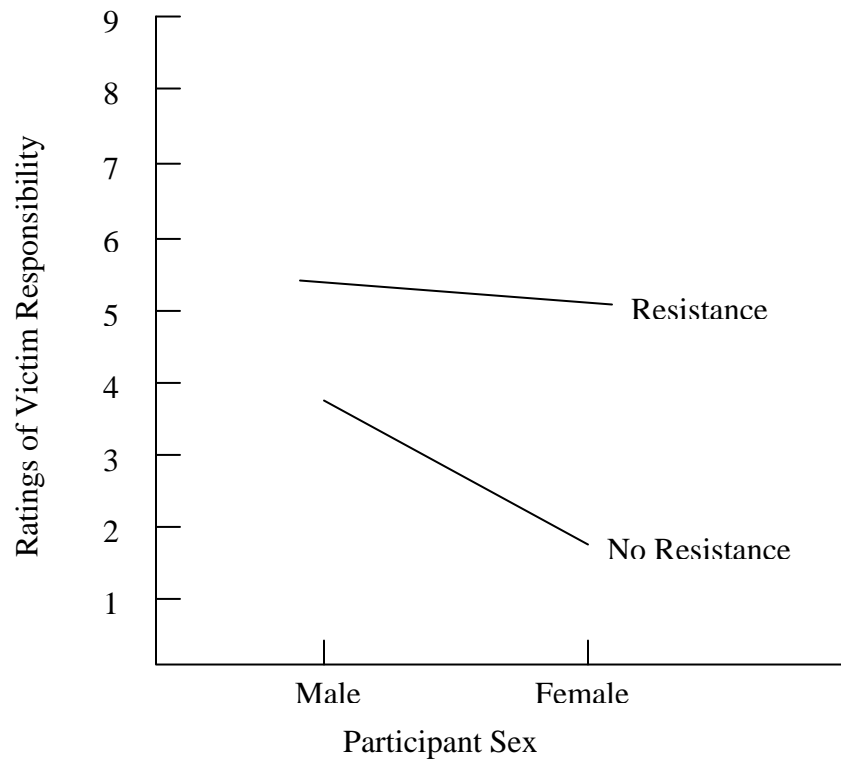


Figure 1. Participants' mean ratings of victim responsibility as a function of amount of resistance and participant sex.