Coping with an Unjust Fate: The Case of Structural Unemployment

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Becoming a victim of structural unemployment means suffering an unjust fate. The present research examines the cognitive reactions subjects use to protect their belief in a just world and the related effects on their actual well-being within a sample of unemployed blue-collar workers in East Germany (all female). Results showed that the belief in a just world was positively correlated with attributing one's unemployment to one's own behavior and negatively with asking "why me?", but uncorrelated with subjects' readiness to change into another profession in order to get employed. Just world belief and depression were negatively related for those who either avoided the "why me?" question or who found an answer to it; but just world belief and depression was positively related for those women ruminating about an unanswered "why me?". Results are consistent with the idea that the belief in a just world plays a significant role in the unemployed person's coping process.

Unemployment is well known as a risk factor for psychic health and physical well-being. The probability of depressive symptoms is high and the psychic burdening becomes more pronounced the longer unemployment has lasted (cf. Häfner, 1990; Hamilton, *et al.*, 1993). This was true for the former Federal Republic of Germany (Häfner, 1990) and it was shown for East Germany after the unification as well (Frese, 1994). Since the unification of East and West Germany, unemployment is an existential problem for a large number of families in East Germany. Three years after the unification half of the East German industrial jobs were closed (Spiegel,

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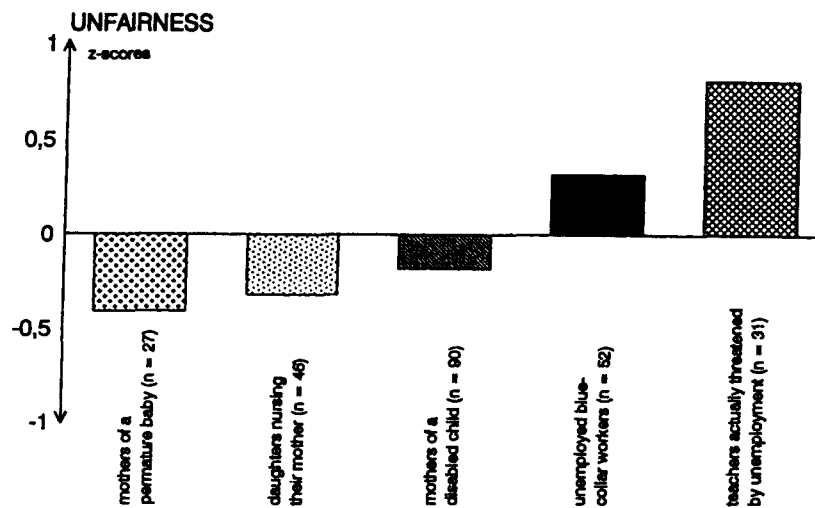
UNFAIRNESS

Fig. 1. Unfairness rating and kind of fate (subjects all female).

1993a). The unemployment rate varied between 15 and 18% in different East German regions (Spiegel, 1993b), but about half of the labor force could be described as in an uncertain job position (Brandt, 1993). Unemployment in East Germany is especially a problem for women; two out of three unemployed people are female (e.g., *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 1992). The study described in this paper took place between December 1991 and March 1992 in Saxony in East Germany. At this time the number of unemployed persons in Saxony grew from 214,889 in the second quarter of 1991 to 300,286 in the second quarter of 1992, but in the same time the small number of available jobs remained constant (8,997 to 8,610, respectively).

Becoming a victim of structural unemployment means suffering an unjust fate, a fate that is highly adverse but basically not self-inflicted. Especially, persons threatened by job insecurity tend to evaluate their fate as unjust. In five studies a total of 246 female victims were asked whether they think about their fate in terms of unfairness. The answers were given on a 11-point Likert scale with a high value indicating a strong unfairness cognition. In addition to the East German unemployed blue-collar workers described below in more detail, East German teachers highly threatened by unemployment were asked for their unfairness rating as well. This study was done during a 4-week waiting period at the end of which a governmental commission was expected to publish who would be given her notice because of political misdemeanor in the former German Democratic Republic. Most threatening, the evaluation criteria were not publicly known.

Besides these two samples of women facing job insecurity, mothers of a premature baby, mothers of a disabled, child or daughters nursing their mother were asked for their comparable unfairness rating. Z scores of these unfairness ratings are depicted in Fig. 1. As can be easily seen unemployment or employment insecurity was seen as more unfair than facing one of the other burdens.

Although the victims themselves often evaluate their unemployment as unfair, justice theories were rarely used in psychological unemployment research (Kieselbach, 1995). An aim of this study was to investigate the unemployed peprson's coping reactions from a justice perspective. The just world hypothesis of Lerner (1965; Lerner and Miller, 1978) served as framework to develop hypotheses for this study.

People are motivated to believe in a just world in which everybody gets what one deserves and in which one deserves what one gets. This belief in a just world can be seen as an interindividually varying disposition (Rubin and Peplau, 1973, 1975). It functions as a basic schema that enables people to confront their environment as though it were stable and orderly (Lerner and Miller, 1978) and it influences the processing, encoding, and recollection of one's daily experiences (Cantor, 1990; Epstein, 1990). The just world belief (JWB) is not an exact description of reality, it is rather a positive misperception. Therefore, it could be interpreted as positive illusion (cf. Lerner and Somers, 1992; Lipkus *et al.*, 1996) which fosters the maintenance of a positive psychic balance (Epstein, 1990; Taylor and Brown, 1988). In this respect the belief in a just world serves important adaptive functions and people are motivated to protect their belief in a just world. Facing unfairness like being the victim of structural unemployment threatens the JWB. Just world research, therefore, suggests the hypotheses that unemployed persons are motivated to protect their belief in a just world and that doubts about a just world should be a serious threat to the unemployed persons' mental health.

The meaning of self-blame is often discussed within the framework of just world research (e.g., Bulman and Wortman, 1977; Lerner and Miller, 1978; Libow and Doty, 1979). An adverse but self-inflicted fate is no longer unfair. Therefore, internal causal attributions can be seen as protecting one's belief in a just world. Interpreting one's miserable fate as at least partly caused by one's own behavior gives meaning to a seemingly random fate and can strengthen one's belief in personal control. Therefore, it was expected that self-blame is more probable the stronger the victim's belief in a just world is and that behavioral attributions (Janoff-Bulman, 1979) are adaptive for the victim's mental or physical health.

The evidence is far from clear. In two victim studies (Agrawal and Dalal, 1993; Libow and Doty, 1979) no relationship between JWB and self-

blame could be observed; in one victim study (Kiecolt-Glaser and Williams, 1987) and in one student study (Rim, 1986) the expected positive relationship was evidenced. The research about the direct link between self-blame and well-being is even more confusing. In 40 studies, 124 relationships between some kind of self-blame and an indicator of psychic or physical well-being were tested (cf., Dalbert, 1996). Adaptive relationships were significantly underrepresented ($n = 17$) and nonsignificant relationships were overrepresented ($n = 75$; $p < 0.001$). Nonsignificant relationships were also overrepresented ($n = 33$ out of 42) when summing up only the studies measuring self-blame as a behavioral attribution. Depression was used as criterion in 41 relationships. Here again, adaptive relationships were clearly underrepresented ($n = 1$) and non-significant relationships were overrepresented ($n = 23$).

Because none of these studies were done with unemployed subjects, hypotheses about the critical relationships within the field of unemployment could only be derived. Unemployment is a reversible fate. Subjects are more hoping that unemployment will end rather than trying to find some meaning in it. Additionally, in the case of structural unemployment internal attributions would be unrealistic. Consequently, behavioral attributions of structural unemployment are rarely observed (Bergmann, 1992; Lerner, 1993). But typically, internal attributions of reversible loss experiences—as compared to internal attributions of an irreversible fate (cf., Dalbert, 1996)—should be more likely the stronger the belief in a just world. Only these attributions can protect one's just world belief, thereby giving meaning to one's fate, and can enhance one's feeling of control, and should therefore be adaptive for the victims' mental health (Dalbert and Warndorf, 1995). Internal attributions of an irreversible fate are maladaptive (e.g., Dalbert and Warndorf, 1995). They may give meaning to one's fate, but they cannot foster feelings of control and should be accompanied by guilt feelings. In sum, although behavioral attributions of structural unemployment should be unusual they should be positively correlated with the belief in a just world and with mental health.

Unemployed persons often are in despair, ruminating about their fate, and facing existential doubts. Brooding over the question "why me?" seems typical for victims of serious life strokes. It indicates the opposite of believing in a structured and just world. An unanswered "why me?" question should be a serious threat for one's JWB. The more people believe in a just world the more they should avoid ruminating about "why me?". It is well documented for different critical life events but not unemployment that the question "why me?" is a maladaptive coping reaction for mental and physical health (e.g., Affleck *et al.*, 1985; Bliesmeister *et al.*, 1992; Burgess and Holmstrom, 1979; Silver *et al.*, 1983; Rogner *et al.*, 1987; Witen-

berg et al., 1983; but not: Affleck et al., 1985; Kiecolt-Glaser and Williams, 1987). The need to protect one's belief in a just world while simultaneously facing existential doubts should be even more threatening. Therefore, it was hypothesized that the maladaptive relationship between the "why me?" question and mental health should be closer the stronger the just world belief is.

A third question should be explored in this study. The just world belief can be seen as a positive illusion and one can be suspicious as to whether this belief fosters wishful thinking and at the same time weakens problem-focused coping (cf. Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Questionnaire studies with nonvictims show relationships in the opposite direction. The stronger the belief in a just world, the lower the probability of procrastination (Ferrari and Emmons, 1994), self-defeating behavior (Schill et al., 1992), and wishful thinking or forgetfulness (Rim, 1986), and the higher the probability of problem orientation and action planning (Rim, 1986). To be seen as an adaptive coping resource within the field of unemployment, the just world belief should at least not inhibit job search activities.

Taken collectively, JWB should be positively correlated with a behavioral attribution of one's unemployment and negatively with asking "why me?". The probability of depressive symptoms should be lower for those attributing their unemployment at least partly to their own behavior and it should be higher for those ruminating about the question "why me?" The latter should be truer the stronger the just world belief.

METHOD

The study was done in a questionnaire format in Winter 1991/1992 in Saxony in East Germany. All subjects were unemployed and took part in courses offered by the German Federal Labor Administration with the aim of raising the chances of employment. Participation in these courses, if offered, is prescribed by law. Processing of the questionnaire was part of the course program but answering was anonymous. Due to this procedure the sample is small but is not scarcely contaminated by self-selection.

Sample

Fifty-four questionnaires were distributed to female participants. One questionnaire had to be excluded because the coping part was unanswered. Finally, the sample comprised 53 unemployed female blue-collar workers with a mean length of unemployment of 34 weeks (SD = 25; range = 1-104). They were mostly middle-aged ($\bar{x}$ = 36 years; SD = 10; range

19-55), married ($n = 36$) with at least one child ($n = 34$). For the most part ($n = 38$) the monthly family income was less than $800.

Research Instruments

Trait well-being was measured with a German version of Underwood and Froming's mood level scale (1980: cf., Dalbert, 1992; 6 items, e.g., "I consider myself a happy person"). As indicator of the subjective state well-being the probability of depressive symptoms were measured with the German short version (ADS-K; Hautzinger and Bailer, 1993) of the Center of Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977; 15 items, e.g., "In the last week everything was exhausting for me "). Belief in a just world was measured with the German General Just World Scale (Dalbert *et al.*, 1987; 6 items, e.g., "I think basically the world is a just place"). Each item of the mood level as well as the just world scale was rated on a 6-point Likert scale with endpoints at 1 (*totally disagree*) and 6 (*totally agree*). Scale means were used as scale values with a high value indicating a strong construct. Items of the depression scale were rated on 4-point Likert scales with endpoints at 0 (*never*) and 3 (*most of the time*). The higher the scale's sum the higher the probability of depressive symptoms. Questionnaires were part of a larger package beginning with the personal dispositions as belief in a just world followed by the well-being scales and the coping question, asking for the demographic data at the end (cf. Dalbert, 1996).

Coping was assessed with several items. Subjects were asked whether they have ever asked themselves, "Why me of all people who is unemployed?" If answering with "Yes," they were asked to indicate whether or not they found an answer and if not they should briefly describe their answer. Subjects were asked to rate five factors that possibly caused their unemployment. Ratings were given on 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*totally*). The rating of "something, which I have done" was used as indicating a behavioral attribution. Only 4 women (8%; missing data $n = 3$) did not circle the 1. Therefore, the behavioral attribution rating was dichotomized. As indicator for problem-focused coping subjects were asked whether they have thought about going into another profession. If answering with "Yes," subjects were asked to name the alternative profession.

For the four dichotomous variables (job flexibility, asking the "why me?" question, finding an answer, and behavioral attribution), 1 means job flexible [$n = 23$ (44%); missing data, $n = 1$], question asked [$n = 42$ (81%); missing data, $n = 1$], answer found [$n = 13$ (25%)] and unemployment partly attributed to one's own behavior; 0 means not job flexible, no "why me?" question asked, no answer found, own behavior was not rated as a cause of one's unemployment.

Table I. Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations[a]

Variable	$\bar{x}$	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Length of unemployment	33.6	24.7	–						
2. Mood level	3.63	0.94	$-.29^b$	–					
3. Just world belief	3.21	1.02	.01	$.30^c$	–				
4. Asking "why me?"	0.81		.18	-.15	$-.30^c$	–			
5. Finding an answer	0.25		-.03	-.05	-.08	$.28^c$	–		
6. Behavioral attribution	0.08		-.05	.05	$.27^b$	-.04	-.01	–	
7. Job flexibility	0.44		.10	-.09	-.02	-.05	.20	-.13	–
8. Depressive symptoms	12.6	8.07	$.42^d$	$-.55^e$	.05	.05	-.05	.05	-.06

[a]Length of unemployment is given in weeks. Mood level and just world belief scores ranged from 1–6, Depressive symptoms from 0–45 with a high value indicating a strong construct. Asking "why me?", Finding an answer, behavioral attribution, and Job flexibility were coded 0 (= no) and 1 (= yes).
[b]$p < 0.10$.
[c]$p < 0.05$.
[d]$p < 0.01$.
[e]$p < 0.001$.

RESULTS

The variables' means, standard deviations, and correlations are given in Table I. Seven correlations showed at least a tendency to be significant with the correlation between asking "why me?" and finding an answer to be trivial. The probability of depressive symptoms was higher and the mood level worse the longer unemployment had lasted. Mood level showed a tendency to be higher the shorter time the women were unemployed. No direct correlations between well-being and coping were observed.

Just world belief was significantly correlated with three variables. Besides a positive correlation with mood level, there were the expected correlations with behavioral attribution and asking "why me?" With $r = .27$ ($p = 0.062$) the correlation of JWB and behavioral attribution was marginally significant. The 4 women who behaviorally attributed their unemployment endorsed the just world belief more strongly ($\bar{x} = 4.17$; SD = 1.58) than the remaining 46 women not seeing their own behavior at least partly causing the unemployment ($\bar{x} = 3.16$; SD = 0.96).

Concerning the "why me?" question three groups were differentiated. Ten women (19%) did not ask themselves "why me?", a majority of 29 women (56%) asked "why me?" without finding an answer, and 13 women (25%) asked "why me?" and found an answer. An ANOVA with this group factor revealed that the three groups differed in their just world belief; $F(2, 49) = 2.450, p = 0.097$. Those women *not* asking "why me?" showed a marginally higher just world belief ($\bar{x} = 3.84$; SD = 0.90; LSD < 0.10) than those asking "why me?" ($\bar{x} = 3.08$; SD = 1.08) or without ($\bar{x} = 3.05$; SD = 1.00) finding an answer. Finding an answer or not was independent

of the subjects' just world belief. Therefore, these two groups could be collapsed. The remaining relationship between JWB and asking "why me?" is best described with the significant bivariate correlation given in Table I.

The relationships between just world belief and the coping reactions—except behavioral attribution—were routinely tested to determine whether any of them varied with length of unemployment. The relationships were compared for the half of women (n = 22) unemployed for half a year or less with the other half of the sample unemployed for more than 26 weeks (n = 22). For both subsamples JWB and finding an answer were uncorrelated (p > 0.20). But a difference was observed for asking the "why me?" question. For those unemployed for half a year or less the negative correlation was significant (r = -.48; p = 0.023), but not for those unemployed for more than 26 weeks (r = -.20; p = 0.360). Just world belief and job flexibility were clearly unrelated (see Table I) and this was true independent of the length of unemployment.

Relationship between depressive symptoms and coping as well as just world belief was tested via moderated regression analysis. To control for the effects of mood level and length of unemployment both variables were entered first, next the four coping variables were entered followed by the interaction terms of coping with JWB and with length of unemployment, respectively. Within each step predictors were ordered by the amount of variance explained. The accepted model (p < 0.05) is depicted in Table II. Because length of unemployment showed a large number of missing data (missing data, n = 9), the accepted model was rerun without length of unemployment. Results of this multiple regression are virtually the same (see Table II). Discussion is based on the accepted model with length of unemployment included.

Besides the 31% of variance already explained by mood level and the 14% of variance additionally explained by length of unemployment with its interaction, just world belief with its interaction finally explained 19% of variance in the depression variable. The relationship between just world belief and depression was moderated by reacting with the "why me?" question. For those women not asking "why me?" (b_{JWB} = -4.78) and for those who already found an answer (b_{JWB} = -1.19) the probability of depressive symptoms was lower the more they endorsed the JWB. For those still ruminating about the "why me?" question without any answer, the probability of depressive symptoms was higher the stronger their JWB was (b_{JWB} = 3.84). Additionally, the interaction with length of unemployment showed that finding an answer was more important the longer the unemployment had lasted. For example, for unemployed women with an answer who were unemployed for 9 weeks (= $\bar{x}$-SD; see Table I) 20.33 was added to the expected depression value, but for those unemployed for 58 weeks (= $\bar{x}$ +

Table II. Moderated Regression Models of Mood Level, Length of Unemployment, Just World Belief, Coping, and the Interactions of Coping with Just World Belief and with Length of Unemployment as Predictors of Depressive Symptoms (Accepted Model)[a]

Variables	R	R^2-change	b	T	p
Regression with length of unemployment, F_{total} (8, 34) = 8.068, $p < 0.001$					
Mood level	.55	.31[e]	-5.19	-4.898	<.001
Length of unemployment	.62	.07[c]	0.15		
Just world belief	.65	.04	-4.78		
Finding an answer	.65	.00	22.49		
Asking "why me?"	.65	.00	-31.97		
Just world belief × Asking "why me?"	.72	.09[c]	8.62	3.513	.001
Length × Finding an answer	.77	.07[c]	-0.24	-2.948	.006
Just world belief × Finding an answer	.81	.06[c]	-5.03	-2.468	.019
(Constant)			47.13		
Regression without length of unemployment, F_{total} (6, 44) = 7.592; p 0.001					
Mood level	.55	.31[e]	-4.64	-4.686	<.001
Just world belief	.60	.05[b]	-3.89		
Finding an answer	.60	.01	13.86		
Asking "why me?"	.61	.00	-28.26		
Just world belief × Asking "why me?"	.67	.08[c]	8.23	3.204	.003
Just world belief × Finding an answer	.71	.07[c]	-5.07	-2.414	.020
(Constant)			45.20		

[a]Length of unemployment is given in weeks. Mood level and Just world belief scores ranged from 1–6. Depressive symptoms from 0–45 with a high value indicating a strong construct. Asking "why me?", Finding an answer, Behavioral attribution, and Job flexibility were coded 0 (= no) and 1 (= yes).
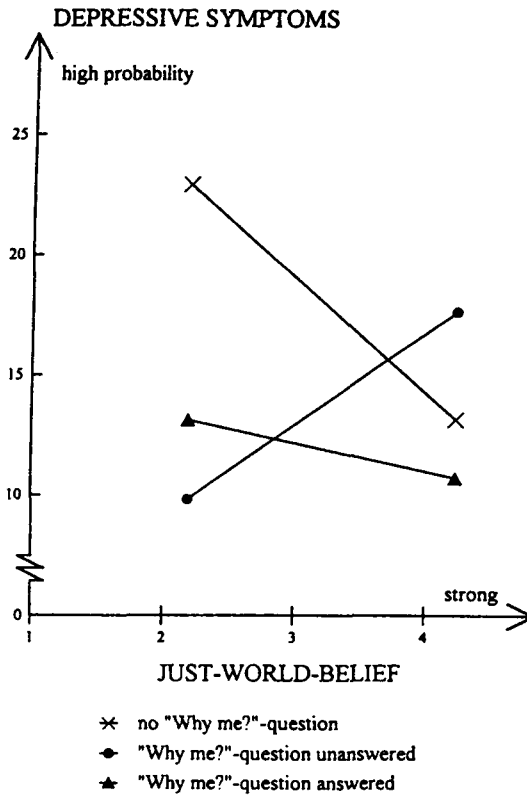[b]$p < 0.10$.
[c]$p < 0.05$.
[d]$p < 0.01$.
[e]$p < 0.001$.

SD) it was only 8.57. The interaction terms' meaning is as well shown in Fig. 2 for length of unemployment fixed at 34 weeks (= $\bar{x}$).

DISCUSSION

The results are very much in line with the theoretical considerations. Two justice-motivated coping reactions could be evidenced, behavioral attribution and the "why me?" question. In line with unemployment studies with victims of plant closure (Lerner, 1993) or victims of the dramatic political and economic changes taking place in East Germany after the unification (Bergmann, 1992) internal attributions were uncommon here as well. The expected positive correlation between just world belief and behavioral attribution was only marginally significant but impressive considering the fact that only 4 subjects made use of a behavioral attribution. The more the female workers endorsed the belief in a just world the more they agreed that their unemployment was at least partly caused by their own doings. This result is in line with the consideration that the behavioral

DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS

JUST-WORLD-BELIEF

✕   no "Why me?"-question
●   "Why me?"-question unanswered
▲   "Why me?"-question answered

Notice. Length of unemployment fixed to 34 weeks.

Fig. 2. Meaning of just world belief and "why me?"-question for the unemployed women's depressive symptoms.

attribution of one's miserable fate is a possible way to protect the belief in a meaningful and just world. Therefore, and because such attributions are seen as enhancing one's feeling of control they should be adaptive for the victims' mental health (Janoff-Bulman, 1979). But no relationship between this attribution and the depression variable could be observed. Post hoc, it can also be speculated as to why this occurred. It may simply be a function of the attribution's odd distribution or of the well-being criteria used. For depression as used here as well as in other unemployment studies (cf. Häfner, 1990) adaptive relationships were rarely observed. Finally, as could be evidenced with victims of another life stroke (cf. Dalbert, 1996) the more realistic those attributions are the more adaptive they should be

(cf. Taylor *et al.*, 1991). But behavioral attributions of structural unemployment are virtually unrealistic, which may explain the nonexistent relationship. At best it could be stated at the moment such attributions did not cause any harm to the victims' well-being.

The "why me?" question turned out to be important for understanding the coping process. Only 19% reported that they had never asked themselves "why me?" This percentage is lower compared to the one third observed with a somewhat different item in another study about unemployed men and women in East Germany (Hahn, 1995); but it is very comparable with studies done with victims of other life strokes (cf., Affleck *et al.*, 1985a; Bulman and Wortman, 1977; Gotay, 1985; Silver *et al.*, 1983). A remarkably high percentage (56%) of the total sample (other studies: 14–50%) did not find an answer. This may be explained by the striking lack of reevaluations, as exemplified here, for the behavioral attribution.

As hypothesized, the more the unemployed tried to avoid the "why me?" question the more they believed in a just world. This was evidenced by the significant correlation between both variables. If interpreting this relationship as showing that the belief in a just world protects the unemployed from ruminating about the "why me?" question, it must be noticed that this was true only immediately a victim. For those unemployed for more than 6 months this relationship vanishes. This interactive relationship between just world belief, the "why me?" question, and length of burdening seems to be a stable one. It was replicated in another field of interest (cf. Dalbert, 1996).

The interaction between just world belief and the "why me?" variables were significantly related to the actual psychological adjustment. This was true when it was controlled for length of unemployment, a well-known predictor of the unemployed persons' mental health (cf. Häfner, 1990), and for mood level. Controlling for trait well-being is one way in nonlongitudinal research to come closer to predicting the actual well-being. For example, relationships between trait well-being and coping should be interpreted as evidence for well-being predicting coping. Only relationships between coping and actual well-being when controlled for trait well-being can be seen as early evidence that coping will predict actual well-being. The latter was true for the "why me?" question.

The relationship between just world belief and depression was moderated by the "why me?" question. For one half of the sample the belief in a just world was adaptive, for the other half it was maladaptive (see Fig. 2). For those women either not asking "why me?" or reporting about an answer ($n = 23$; 44%) the probability of depressive symptoms was lower the more they endorsed the just world belief. For the remaining 29 women the probability of depressive symptoms was lower the less they endorsed the just world
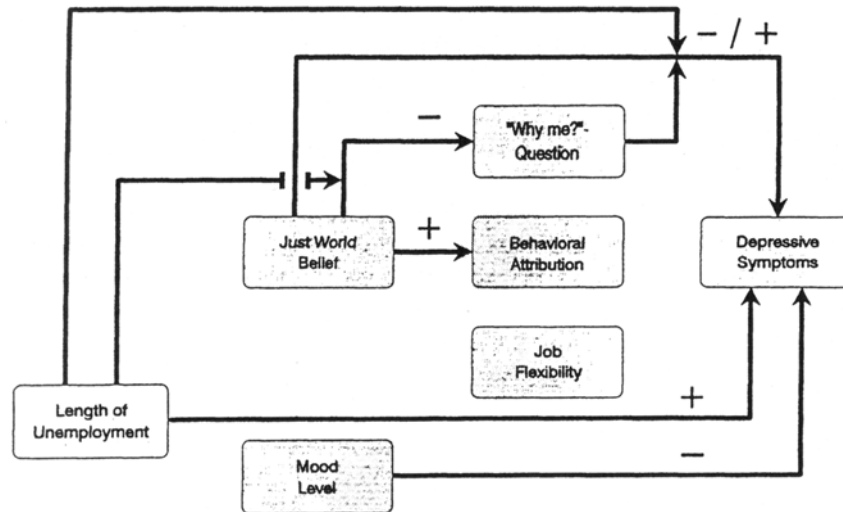
Fig. 3. Justice-motivated coping with unemployment—a theoretical model.

belief. This result pattern explains why no direct relationship between just world belief and depression was observed (Benson and Ritter, 1990).

To understand more fully the result pattern the three regression lines' endpoints (see Fig. 2) can be described in more detail. For those women at the same time believing in a just world and avoiding the "why me?" question, the probability of depressive symptoms was low. This combination describes the *protection of the meaning of one's life* and is more likely immediately after the victimization. The other endpoint of this regression line can best be described as *fatalism* which describes subjects who neither believed in a just world nor started the search for some meaning in their fate by asking the "why me?" question. Fatalism was accompanied by a very high likelihood of depressive symptoms. The gap between ruminating about an unanswered "why me?" and a strong just world belief seems to be maladaptive. These kind of *doubts* met with a high probability of depressive symptoms. But asking the "why me?" question without endorsing the just world belief seems to be reasonable. This *search for a meaning* was observed in combination with a low likelihood of depressive symptoms. Also danger of depressive symptoms was observed for those women who had already found an answer. For those *finding a new meaning in their fate* psychic adaptation was only slightly better if they believed in a just world at the same time.

This clear result pattern together with the large amount of variance explained by these variables (19%) underlines the notion that for the victim of structural unemployment believing in a meaningless world is highly

threatening. For all subjects it mattered whether or not they believed in a just world, and a secure just world belief seems to be adaptive for the unemployed persons' psychic well-being. Most important, just world belief and job flexibility were unrelated. As shown in studies with nonvictims, this is a hint that the just world belief's adaptive role is not undermined by wishful thinking or reduced problem-focused coping.

Of course, the study described in this paper is more in line with the development of a theory than of proving one. The sample was small however this is a normal case for studies with victimized subjects, and replication of the central findings is needed. But the results give support to the recommendation that psychological unemployment research should have a closer look at the belief in a just world and the search for meaning in one's life. A theoretical model, which is in accordance with the data presented throughout the paper, is depicted in Fig. 3. It could serve as a guideline for future research about coping with structural unemployment within the framework of justice psychology.

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