

Belief in a Just World and Commitment to Long-Term Deserved Outcomes

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We investigated whether people need to believe in a just world in part because such a belief helps people to work toward long-term goals and to do so in such a way that they are deserved. We assessed participants' long-term goal focus and also their commitment to deserving their outcomes (via a psychopathy scale). In a second session, participants were then exposed to a victim whose situation did or did not contradict a belief in a just world. When the victim's situation contradicted a belief in a just world, the greater the participants' tendency to focus on long-term outcomes, the more they blamed the victim for her misfortune; but this relation only occurred for participants with a strong commitment to deserving their outcomes (i.e., those low in psychopathy). The results are consistent with our argument that, given the function of the belief in a just world proposed in this article, people would have a greater need to preserve the belief (e.g., by blaming victims of injustice) the greater their investment in long-term and deserved outcomes.

KEY WORDS: justice; belief in a just world; psychopathy; long-term goals.

In 1966, Lerner and Simons proposed that people need to believe in a just world in which individuals get what they deserve. When their belief in a just world is threatened by the presence of innocent suffering, people will be motivated to preserve the belief by compensating or helping the victim; or, if they cannot compensate the victim for his or her suffering, people may preserve their belief in a just world psychologically by, for example, derogating the character of the victim so that the victim appears more deserving of his or her fate (Lerner and Simmons, 1966). The concept of a belief in a just world has maintained some

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popularity over the past 40 years (for reviews see Furnham, 2003; Furnham and Procter, 1989; Hafer and Bègue, 2005; Lerner and Miller, 1978). A great deal of this research has focused on the implications of a need to believe in a just world for reactions to various types of victims as well as on the correlates of individual differences in the strength of people's belief in a just world. The purpose of the present study was to extend this research by investigating one potential function of a belief in a just world. Lerner hypothesized about the functions of the belief in a just world in his 1980 book, *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion*. Specifically, Lerner suggested that a belief in a just world fulfills a need to live in a predictable environment in which one's investments are rewarded, presumably in accordance with what one deserves (see also Dalbert, 2001). It is this potential function that we examine in the present investigation.

The reasoning presented in this article derives from early writings on the belief in just world and the *personal contract* (see Lerner, 1977; Lerner *et al.*, 1976). According to Lerner (1977; Lerner *et al.*, 1976), when children move away from gratifying immediate impulses, they commit to a *personal contract* by which they agree to act according to what they have learned is prescribed with the "assumption that an appropriately more desirable outcome will accrue to [them] . . . in the future" (Lerner *et al.*, 1976, p. 135). In return for this commitment, the expected outcome must occur. Individuals do not merely experience these outcomes as expected but as something they are entitled to or deserve because they fulfilled their end of the contract⁴—they did what they were "supposed to do." As people mature, the notion of deserving their outcomes becomes an increasingly central guide to their everyday activities. In order to continue to commit to working toward outcomes that are deserved, of course, people need to trust that the world is a place in which individuals do, in fact, get what they are entitled to; that is, they need to believe that the world is just. If an individual does not hold some form of this belief in a just world, in Lerner's (1977) words, "he will give up his personal contract and act as if he lives in a jungle with all the attendant psychological consequences" (p. 6). Thus, a belief in a just world helps to maintain the personal contract (see also Dalbert, 2001). Given that, at least according to Lerner (1977; Lerner *et al.*, 1976; cf. Dalbert, 1999, 2001), the personal contract involves investing in better and more long-term outcomes rather than acting on immediate impulse, we reasoned that one of the functions of a belief in a just world may be to give people the confidence in the world they need in order to strive toward long-term, deserved outcomes (for other potential functions, see Dalbert, 1999, 2001).

In initial research on the function of a belief in a just world investigated in the present study, Hafer (2000b) reasoned that, if a belief in a just world serves to encourage striving toward long-term deserved outcomes, then a belief in a just

⁴Although we use the terms entitlement and deservingness interchangeably in this article, there have been attempts in recent research to distinguish between these concepts (e.g., Feather, 2003; Feather and Johnstone, 2001).

world should be more essential when long-term goals are particularly salient. Under these conditions, people should engage in stronger attempts to preserve the belief when it is threatened. This reasoning was supported in two experiments (Hafer, 2000b, Studies 1 and 2), one in which a focus on long-term goals was manipulated (via an essay writing task), and one in which the focus on long-term goals was measured as a chronic individual difference variable. In both investigations, participants were exposed to a victim who posed either a strong or weak threat to a belief in a just world (i.e., the victim was innocent vs. responsible for her suffering in Study 1; the victim's innocent suffering continued or was in the past in Study 2). Participants who had a greater focus on long-term goals showed more negative responses toward the strong threat victim than did participants with less long-term goal focus; for example, the former engaged in more victim blame and increased disassociation from the victim (i.e., decreased identification with the victim's experience). There was no such difference when the victim posed little threat to a belief in a just world in the first place. Presumably, a belief in a just world was more important for participants with a stronger focus on long-term goals. Thus, they were more motivated to preserve the belief by, for example, blaming the high threat victim for her fate such that it seemed more deserved.

Hafer's (2000b) results are consistent with the notion that a belief in a just world helps encourage investment in long-term goals. However, one does not necessarily have to believe in a just world in order to make long-term investments. For example, a person who embezzles money over a long period of time in order to reap great long-term benefits may not be attempting to obtain outcomes that are deserved or just (at least not in terms of society's shared concept of deservingness; see Feather, 1999). A belief in a just world presumably only helps one to invest in future outcomes if one plans to "play by the rules" and, thus, deserve those outcomes. Hafer (2000b, Study 2), in one of the studies described earlier, attempted to test this hypothesis by assessing participants' dispositional delinquency (using Rushton and Chrisjohn's [1981] Self-Report Delinquency Scale) before presenting them with a victim posing a strong or weak threat to a belief in a just world. As predicted, when the victim posed a strong threat to a belief in a just world, the higher participants were in delinquent tendencies (i.e., the less they tried to reach their goals in such a way that they were deserved), the less likely they were to report that the victim was at fault for her misfortune and the less likely they were to disassociate themselves from the victim, both responses that presumably help people maintain a belief in a just world in the face of contradictory evidence (e.g., Hafer, 2000a, Study 2; Jones and Aronson, 1973). These results support the function of a belief in a just world investigated in the present article by suggesting that the desire to preserve a belief in a just world is especially relevant to people who choose to deserve their long-term outcomes—in this case, by attempting to reap desired ends through behaviors that society dictates should be rewarded.

Although Hafer's (2000b, Study 2) delinquency data are consistent with the function of a belief in a just world investigated here, the primary hypothesis

arising from our reasoning—that a belief in a just world helps one to invest in future *deserved* outcomes—was not tested. This hypothesis means that a belief in a just world should be most important when there is *both* a focus on long-term goals and the individual is invested in deserving those goals. Manifestations of a belief in a just world (such as various means of preserving the belief in the face of contradictory evidence), therefore, should similarly be most pronounced when both long-term investment is strong and a desire to reap the rewards that one deserves is strong. In sum, a much better test of our hypothesized function of a belief in a just world is an investigation of the *interactive* influence of long-term focus and a commitment to deserving one's goals. We used an individual difference approach in the present study to explore this potential interaction.

To tap into a commitment toward deserving one's outcomes, we used an instrument designed by Levenson *et al.* (1995) to assess primary psychopathic tendencies (see Karpman, 1948) in nonclinical populations. We decided to use this measure instead of a measure of delinquency (as in Hafer, 2000b, Study 2) because we were concerned that, given the relation between antisocial behavior and impulsivity (e.g., Harpur *et al.*, 1989; Luengo *et al.*, 1994; Lynam *et al.*, 2000; White *et al.*, 1994), our previous results using the delinquency scale may have simply been due to overlap between the delinquency scale and long-term focus. Thus, we wanted a variable that, while tapping into a commitment to deserving one's outcomes, would not overlap with long-term goal striving. The concept of primary psychopathy met our needs. Primary psychopathy is that type or aspect of psychopathy characterized by such tendencies as callousness, manipulativeness, and untruthfulness (Harpur *et al.*, 1989; Karpman, 1948). Primary psychopathy is related to antisocial behavior (e.g., Levenson *et al.*, 1995; Lynam *et al.*, 1999; McHoskey *et al.*, 1998, Study 2), but is less associated with impulsivity than other similar constructs (such as secondary psychopathy; e.g., Harpur *et al.*, 1989; McHoskey *et al.*, 1998).

In the present study, we manipulated threat to a belief in a just world by varying the perceived innocence of a victim. We then measured perceptions of the extent to which the victim was to blame for her situation. We chose this dependent variable because it provided the clearest, most consistent findings in Hafer (2000b) and because of its popularity in previous just-world research (see Hafer and Bègue, 2005). Prior to exposure to the innocent or noninnocent victim, we assessed participants' psychopathy as well as their tendency to strive toward future goals. We hypothesized that a greater orientation toward future goals would be related to more blame of the innocent victim, but only when participants were low in primary psychopathy (i.e., relatively high in their commitment to deservingness). We expected no such effects for the noninnocent victim who should pose little threat to a belief in a just world in the first place; this victim should be relatively (and nondefensively) condemned in any case because she is in part responsible for her negative fate (see Feather, 1999; Hafer and Bègue, 2005, p. 141)

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 128 students (113 women and 15 men) taking an introductory psychology course at Brock University in the province of Ontario, Canada. All students received course credit for their involvement with the research. Participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions. There were 64 individuals in each of the two conditions, with males and females approximately equally distributed between these groups.

Procedure

There were two sessions in this study. The participants were led to believe that the two sessions were for research on “perceptions of yourself and university life.” In the first session, participants were tested in groups of 5–10. They completed several questionnaires that belonged to unrelated investigations as well as the individual difference measures relevant to this study. The session lasted about 1 h.

Approximately 1 month later, the students returned for the second part of the study. They participated in this session individually. At the beginning of the second session, the experimenter explained that the study had been revised somewhat such that Session 2 was now shorter than originally planned; thus, although the session was supposed to take 1 h, it would now only take about 15 min. They were then introduced to a second experimenter who presumably needed participants for her study on “current health issues.” The second experimenter asked participants if they would like to participate in her health issues study before completing the original investigation. All participants agreed to help with the alleged health issues study.

The second experimenter then explained that they would watch one of several videotapes of people discussing current health issues. They were told that they had been assigned to watch a video of excerpts from an interview with a young woman named Kerry (excerpted from *People Like Us* [Fisher and Fisher, 1992]). In fact, all participants watched the same videotape. Before the video was shown, the experimenter read out to participants some background information about Kerry, presumably so that participants could better understand her situation from the somewhat limited information conveyed in the interview excerpts. This background information included the manipulation of victim innocence (threat to a belief in a just world). The videotape was approximately 7 min long.

After the video, participants were given a questionnaire asking them a number of questions about their opinions of Kerry, the general situation, and the health issue portrayed in the video. Embedded in this questionnaire were the items making up the dependent variable—victim blame—as well as a manipulation check.

Data from the first and second sessions were matched with the use of a code number. Thus, all responses were anonymous.

Manipulation

The description that was read to participants before the video began contained the manipulation of victim innocence. The first part of the description was the same for both groups of participants and read as follows:

In this tape, you'll see an interview which took place about 4 months ago. The name of the woman being interviewed is Kerry and she is HIV positive. Kerry is currently a student in first-year university. In a part of the interview that is not on the video, she says that, while her physical health is okay so far, she has been having emotional difficulties that have disrupted her schoolwork this year. Kerry talks about how, ever since she was diagnosed as having HIV, she has been bothered by vague feelings of anxiety and depression. She has had difficulty concentrating on her studies at university and her performance has worsened over the year. She's considering dropping out and giving up her hopes of getting a degree. She expresses some other more general concerns about her future as well. She also talks about how she contracted the virus in the first place. She says that she has typically been careful in her sexual relations—she says she has not had sex with a lot of different people, has never had sex with strangers, and she has engaged in safer sexual practices, like using condoms.

The next sentence varied slightly by condition. In the innocent victim (strong threat to a belief in a just world) condition the sentence read, "She says that she likely contracted the virus on a particular night when a condom broke during intercourse." In the noninnocent victim condition (weak threat to a belief in a just world) condition, the sentence read, "She says that she likely contracted the virus on a particular night when she did not use a condom during intercourse."

Dependent Variable

We investigated the effect of individual differences and the manipulation of victim innocence on the extent to which people would blame the victim or hold her responsible for contracting HIV. Four items assessed perceived blame/responsibility: "To what extent do you think that Kerry's *behavior* is *responsible* for the fact that she contracted HIV?," "To what extent do you think that Kerry's *personality* is *responsible* for the fact that she contracted HIV?," "To what extent do you think that Kerry's *behavior* is to *blame* for the fact that she contracted HIV?," "To what extent do you think that Kerry's *character* is to *blame* for the fact that she contracted HIV?" Each of these questions was answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = not at all responsible/not at all to blame, to 7 = totally responsible/entirely

to blame. These particular items were used, in part, because distinctions have been drawn in the attribution literature between blame and responsibility (e.g., Mantler *et al.*, 2003; Shaver, 1985) and between behavioral versus characterological blame (e.g., Janoff-Bulman, 1979; Karuza and Carey, 1984). The four items, however, were significantly intercorrelated, mean $r = .50$, all p 's $< .01$, and loaded on one factor in an exploratory principle components analysis (all factor loadings $> .70$). Coefficient α for the four items was $.80$. Given these results, we averaged the four blame/responsibility items to create a composite measure of victim blame.

Individual Difference Measures

There were two individual difference measures in this study. We measured primary psychopathy with Levenson *et al.*'s (1995) primary psychopathy scale. This instrument consists of 16 statements (five of which are reverse-keyed) to which participants must indicate their degree of agreement/disagreement on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = disagree strongly to 7 = agree strongly (sample items, "For me what's right is whatever I can get away with"; "I let others worry about higher values"; my main concern is with the bottom line"). This instrument was developed with undergraduate students and shows coefficient α 's between about $.73$ and $.88$ for primary psychopathy (see Elwood *et al.*, 2004). Studies have shown evidence of good validity (e.g., Levenson *et al.*, 1995; McHoskey *et al.* 1998). In the present study, coefficient α for Levenson *et al.*'s (1995) primary psychopathy scale was $.80$.

The instrument we used to assess orientation toward long-term goals was the Future Scale from Zimbardo's (1990) Stanford Time Perspective Inventory. The scale consists of 13 statements (three of which are reverse-keyed) regarding the tendency to plan for and invest in future goals as well as the importance of future goals and commitments (sample statements include "When I want to achieve something, I set goals and consider specific means for reaching those goals"; "I take each day as it is rather than try to plan it out," reverse-keyed). Participants must indicate the veracity of each statement on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = very untrue to 5 = very true. Zimbardo (1990) reported a coefficient α of $.77$. The scale correlates moderately, as expected, with Strathman *et al.*'s (1994) Consideration of Future Consequences Scale. In the present study, coefficient α for the Future Scale was $.83$.

RESULTS

An α level of $.05$ was used for all inferential statistics reported in the Results section. Two-tailed tests were used unless otherwise specified (i.e., for a priori hypotheses).

Preliminary Analyses

To check our manipulation of victim innocence, we asked participants to write down everything they could remember about Kerry's story. In the innocent victim condition, 52/64 individuals mentioned that Kerry contracted the disease as a result of a condom breaking during intercourse. Four participants mentioned that she contracted the disease simply during sex with no other details given, six did not mention how she caught the disease, one noted a reason other than sexual contact, and one participant did not answer the question. No participant in this condition erroneously recalled that the victim contracted the disease as a result of practicing unsafe sex. In the noninnocent victim condition, 38/64 participants explicitly mentioned that the victim contracted HIV as a result of unsafe sexual practices, 17 mentioned that the disease was a result of sexual relations but did not mention other details, eight did not mention how Kerry contracted HIV, and one noted a reason other than sexual contact. No participant in this condition erroneously recalled that Kerry contracted HIV via a broken condom. This open-ended question was a conservative check of our manipulation, given that participants may deliberately not have listed all facts they could remember (due to fatigue, for example). Additionally, we cannot determine whether or not participants who merely said "sex" was the cause of Kerry's disease correctly remembered exactly how the disease was contracted. Despite these shortcomings of our manipulation check, we believe the results show that the manipulation was generally effective.

Average scores were created for both of the individual difference scales (after reverse-keying appropriate items). Descriptive statistics for primary psychopathy (skewness = .24, kurtosis = $-.75$, $M = 1.77$, $SD = .39$) and for future orientation (skewness = $-.33$, kurtosis = $-.74$, $M = 3.63$, $SD = .65$) indicated relatively normal distributions. Also, primary psychopathy and future orientation were marginally correlated, $r(126) = -.16$, $p = .08$.

Test of Hypothesis

A hierarchical regression analysis was used to test the hypothesis that, in the innocent victim condition, a stronger future orientation would be related to more victim blame primarily among individuals low in primary psychopathy. The individual difference measures were not expected to interact to predict blame when the victim was noninnocent. The victim innocence manipulation was dummy coded and the continuous predictor variables were centered before performing the regression analyses (see Aiken and West, 1991).

In the first step of the hierarchical regression, we entered the victim innocence manipulation as well as the primary psychopathy and future orientation individual difference scores. In the second step, we entered the three possible

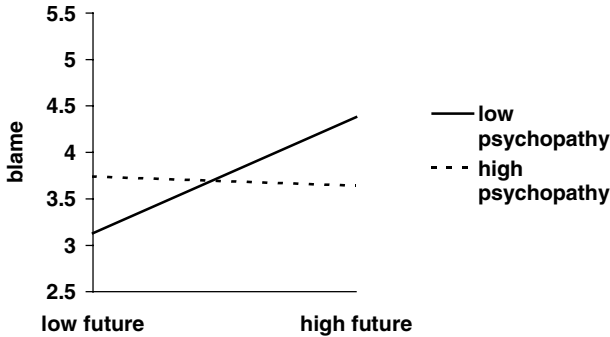


Fig. 1. Victim blame as a function of Primary Psychopathy and Future Orientation, innocent victim condition. High versus low Primary Psychopathy are defined as +1 vs. -1 SD from the mean, respectively.

two-way interaction terms, and in the third step we entered the three-way interaction. In the first step, the only significant predictor was the victim innocence manipulation. Not surprisingly, the victim manipulation accounted for a significant proportion of variance in victim blame over and above the two individual difference measures, $sr^2 = .09$, $t(124) = 3.55$, $p = .001$. This result indicated that the noninnocent victim was blamed more than the innocent victim was. Neither primary psychopathy nor future orientation was a unique predictor in this step of the equation. In the second step of the hierarchical regression, the only significant predictor was the two-way interaction between the victim manipulation and future orientation, $sr^2 = .03$, $t(121) = -2.07$, $p = .04$. This interaction will be interpreted in light of the three-way interaction. The third step of the regression analysis yielded a significant effect for the three-way interaction term, $sr^2 = .03$, $t(120) = 1.88$, $p = .03$ (one-tailed). This interaction is plotted in Figs. 1 and 2. To further explore this effect we used procedures described by Aiken and West (1991) and Cohen *et al.* (2003). First, we examined the simple two-way interactions between future orientation and primary psychopathy at each level of the victim manipulation. The Future Orientation \times Primary Psychopathy interaction was significant when the victim was innocent, $sr^2 = .03$, $t(120) = -2.00$, $p = .024$ (one-tailed), but not when she was noninnocent, $sr^2 = .004$, $t(120) = .76$, $p = .23$ (one-tailed). Simple slope analyses for the innocent victim condition, using 1 SD above and below the mean for primary psychopathy, showed that the slope was significantly different from 0 only for the simple regression line in which blame is regressed onto future orientation at a low level of primary psychopathy, $sr^2 = .06$, $t(120) = 3.00$, $p = .002$ (one-tailed).⁵

⁵The same pattern of results was found for simple slope analyses performed for separate composite measures of behavioral blame/responsibility and character blame/responsibility.

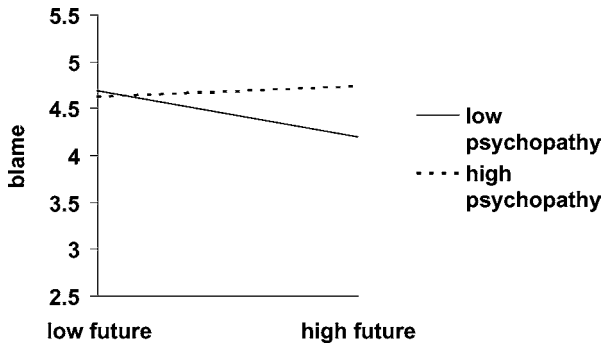


Fig. 2. Victim blame as a function of Primary Psychopathy and Future Orientation, noninnocent victim condition. High versus low Primary Psychopathy are defined as +1 vs. -1 SD from the mean, respectively.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the notion that people need to believe in a just world in part because the belief allows them to invest in long-term outcomes and to do so in such a way that those outcomes are seen as deserved (see Dalbert, 2001; Lerner, 1980). We reasoned on the basis of past research by Hafer (2000b) that, given this function, people should have a greater tendency to attempt to preserve their belief in a just world (e.g., by blaming innocent victims for their fate) the more they focus on long-term goals and on obtaining those goals through means that are seen as deserving positively-valued outcomes. Our results supported this reasoning. Specifically, when presented with a victim whose situation presumably contradicted the notion of a just world, the stronger participants' orientation veered toward the future the more they blamed the victim for her fate: As expected, however, this relation only occurred for participants who scored relatively low on a measure of primary psychopathy (i.e., for people with a greater tendency to conform to the rules of deservingness in their goal-seeking behavior).

Previous work (Hafer, 2000b) has investigated the focus on future goals and a commitment to deservingness within the context of efforts to defend a belief in a just world; however, this work did not look at the interaction between these two variables. The present data, therefore, present stronger evidence than does past research that a belief in a just world helps people to invest in long-term goals and to work toward deserving these goals by, for example, engaging in goal-directed behaviors that are seen to deserve positive outcomes (e.g., hard work, honest interactions with others). Presumably, if one believes that the world is just, in the sense that it gives people what they deserve at least in the long-run, one would have confidence that one's well-meaning investments toward long-term goals will eventually result in positive outcomes (see Feather, 1999).

Note that the form of a belief in a just world that would most encourage investment in long-term, deserved outcomes would be a belief in ultimate justice (see Maes, 1998; Maes and Kals, 2002; Maes and Schmitt, 1999). We are referring here to a belief that, even if current events are not fair, eventually people will get what they deserve and justice will prevail. Lerner (1980) suggested that this form of a belief in a just world may develop as children mature and must increasingly deal with evidence of unfairness in the world. Thus, the function of a belief in a just world that is investigated in the present study may apply especially well to a belief in ultimate justice. Other possible functions of a belief in a just world, such as fostering well-being, helping one cope with negative life events (see Dalbert, 1999, 2001), and justifying the existing social hierarchy (see Jost *et al.*, 2004; Pratto *et al.*, 1994) may be served by ultimate justice and/or other forms of a belief in a just world. The relation between different functions and different forms of a belief in a just world is an interesting topic for future research.

The results of the present research highlight the notion that the need to believe in a just world has both positive and negative manifestations. Positive manifestations may include: a desire to help others who seem to suffer through little fault of their own (e.g., Lerner and Simmons, 1966; Miller, 1977); psychological well-being (for reviews, see Dalbert, 2001; Furnham, 2003); and encouragement of investment in long-term goals such that those goals are deserved. On the other hand, when the belief in a just world is threatened and actual justice cannot be restored, those very people whom we admire—seemingly well-adjusted individuals committed to working toward the future and earning their rewards—may be the ones who most readily blame innocent victims for their fate or otherwise justify innocent suffering.

Alternative Explanation

We reasoned a priori that, for those with a chronic focus on long-term goals, individuals scoring low in primary psychopathy would blame the innocent victim more than high scorers because they are more committed to deserving long-term positive outcomes and thus have a greater need to defend their belief in a just world. A belief in a just world in which individuals at least eventually get what they deserve would be essential in providing a basic confidence that their long-term investments will pay off. An alternative explanation, however, is that those low in primary psychopathy may simply have had a stronger emotional reaction to the innocent victim when a belief in a just world was important to preserve (i.e., when they also possessed a strong orientation toward long-term goals). Psychopathy (especially primary psychopathy) has been related to dampened or delayed emotional responses with respect to emotionally-laden stimuli (e.g., Hare, 1978; Lorenz and Newman, 2002; Patrick *et al.*, 1993; Sutton *et al.*, 2002). Higher emotional arousal may have led individuals low in primary

psychopathy to respond more automatically to the innocent victim by blaming her for her fate, whereas individuals scoring relatively higher in primary psychopathy may have, given a weaker emotional response, offered a more deliberative and, somewhat paradoxically, a less antinormative reaction to the victim. Lerner (e.g., 1980, 2003; Lerner and Goldberg, 1999) has suggested that blaming innocent victims for their fate, an antinormative response to the presence of injustice, is likely to occur only under conditions of high emotional involvement. Under such conditions, individuals may be more likely to rely on automatic and primitive attributions in order to reinterpret the situation as consistent with a belief in a just world. In sum, the difference between low and high primary psychopathy in the present study may not be due to a difference in these individuals' commitment to deserving long-term outcomes, but rather to differences in strategies for dealing with contradictions to a belief in a just world, with individuals scoring low in primary psychopathy responding with less deliberative, more automatic, and emotionally-driven strategies. Alternatively, differences in emotional response may mean that people low versus high in primary psychopathy have different thresholds for perceiving an injustice as a threat. We think it is unlikely that differences in psychopathy in this context merely reflect differences in strategies for maintaining a belief in a just world or differences in the threshold for perceiving injustice (rather than differences in the need to defend a belief in a just world in the face of contradictory information). However, future research using physiological and other indicators of emotion and arousal should be conducted on this issue (for physiological research involving individual differences in belief in a just world, see Tomaka and Blascovich, 1994).

Psychopathy and Belief in a Just World

We know of no previous research investigating psychopathy and the need to believe in a just world. Thus, we believe it is useful to speculate here on the possible link between these two variables. First, our reasoning for the present study implies that, because a belief in a just world has little value to psychopaths, they would likely not need to develop such a belief in the first place. Hafer (2000b, Study 3) found significant negative correlations between endorsement of a belief in a just world and various measures of antisocial tendencies (as well as significant positive correlations between measures of long-term focus and belief in a just world), suggesting that antisocial individuals have a weaker belief in a just world than do other individuals, at least at the explicit level (see Hafer and Bègue, 2005). Of course, these data do not indicate the causal direction between variables; thus, a preexisting strong belief in a just world might lead one to become committed to behaving in a just manner (see Dalbert, 1999). However, for exploratory purposes, let us speculate for now on the possibility that psychopathic tendencies precede the development of certain world beliefs.

If antisocial individuals do not develop a belief in a just world, as suggested earlier, what are their world assumptions with respect to justice? Interestingly, Dalbert *et al.* (2001, Study 3) studied inmates and guards in a Hungarian prison and found that the prisoners scored higher than the guards on an explicit self-report measure of belief in an unjust world (although they found no significant differences for scores on similar scales measuring belief in a just world). There are many possible reasons for this result, but it raises the notion that antisocial individuals may need to believe that the world is a place in which the undeserving (e.g., those using fraud, deceit, illegitimate exploitation, and manipulation) are rewarded and the deserving (e.g., those using prosocial means to obtain their goals) are punished. Another, perhaps more likely, possibility is that individuals high in psychopathy do need to believe in a just world in which individuals get what they deserve, but their concept of a just world is one in which certain antinormative qualities and behaviors are perceived as deserving good outcomes (e.g., successful manipulation of the weak deserves to be rewarded) and the usual qualities prescribed by society are seen as deserving negative outcomes (e.g., “nice” people deserve to be exploited). Indeed, certain items on self-report psychopathy scales imply such thinking (e.g., Levenson *et al.*, 1995). Future research on psychopathy and the need to believe in a just world could directly investigate some of these possibilities.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the reliance on primarily female undergraduate students as participants. Researchers should test the generalizability of these results to men and to nonuniversity samples. Clinical samples might be especially appropriate for attempted replication of these findings. Such populations (and perhaps men as well) show a greater variability in psychopathy scores than do undergraduate students (see Cale and Lilienfeld, 2002). A broader range of scores might lead to larger effects.

Furthermore, we investigated only one type of response to the victim (i.e., victim blame). We chose not to assess multiple strategies for preserving a belief in a just world in part because we had no a priori hypotheses about predictors of different strategies and we believed the situation was constrained such that cognitive reinterpretation of the victim’s behavior and/or character would be one of the few routes to belief in a just world maintenance open to observers (see Hafer and Bègue, 2005, p. 147). However, future research should attempt to generalize our findings to other strategies for preserving a belief in a just world in the face of contradictory evidence (for a summary of alternative strategies, see Hafer and Bègue, 2005). Researchers could also attempt to generalize the results to reactions to one’s own fate, as well as reactions to unjust benefits rather than unjust suffering.

In sum, our research supports the notion that one function of a belief in a just world is to provide the confidence needed to invest in long-term deserved outcomes. Without confidence that the world will reward long-term investments as deserved, people may feel that attempts to be deserving of long-term outcomes—that “playing by the rules”—will be ineffective and investment in any but the most immediate goals is pointless. With such feelings as the alternative, it is perhaps little wonder that people sometimes go to great lengths to maintain their belief that the world is just.

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