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# NORMATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE JUST WORLD BELIEF: A REVIEW WITH FOUR SCALES

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Just World Belief studies (Lerner, 1965; 1980) show that people generally need to believe that they live in a world where they “get what they deserve and deserve what they get” (Lerner & Simmons, 1966, p.204). In this article, we approach two normative characteristics of the Belief in a Just World: its positive social value and its normative perception. We review five studies showing this normativity, employing four specific psychometric tools. After presenting these studies, we will discuss theoretical and social implications of the normativity of the Belief in a Just World.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Just World Belief, Social norms, Self-presentation, Social utility, Social desirability*

## **1. Introduction**

We owe the development of the concept of “orderly world”, mostly known as Belief in a Just World concept (BJW), to Lerner (1965). According to this belief, people perceive the world as a stable and orderly place in which good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people (Lerner, 1965; 1980). In other words, a just world is a world in which people “get what they deserve and deserve what they get” (Lerner & Simmons, 1966, p. 204), the judgment of deserving being based on the outcome that people are entitled to receive. Theory of Just World led to significant developments of its operationalization (Furnham & Procter, 1989; Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996; Rubin & Peplau, 1973; 1975) and also of its social implications (Dalbert, 1999; Hafer, 2000a, 2000b, 2002; Lerner, 1980).

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Following the first study of Lerner and Simmons (1966), a large body of studies underline the adaptive and important function of believing in a just world and as a result people are motivated to protect this particular belief (Dalbert, 1999, 2001). More specifically, Dalbert (2001, 2009) identified three functions of the Belief in a Just World: 1) a function of confidence: the BJW offers people the confidence that they will be treated fairly by others and that they will not be the victim of an unpredictable disaster; 2) a function of assimilation which provides a conceptual framework, helping people to interpret the events of their personal life in a meaningful way; and 3) a motivational function which is indicative of the personal contract and obligation to behave fairly. These properties of the BJW explain a great variety of human behaviours and serve important adaptive functions in our everyday life: they enable people to invest in the future, to enhance achievement behaviour, to reduce stress. This belief leads us to a psychological transformation of our physical and social environment into a stable and orderly world serving as a reference to judge and explain the fate of others and our own.

Even though the manifestations and functions of this belief have been extensively studied, its origin seems insufficiently defined. The absence of a definition of its origin has an impact both on a theoretical level (to identify the processes leading to its emergence/non-emergence) and practical level (the knowledge of these processes can allow actions to promote or disrupt the development of this belief). Taking this into consideration, we make the hypothesis that this belief has a normative origin.

It is known that a norm is characterized by its cultural character (i.e., by intercultural variations concerning its social diffusion and its interiorization), by its positive social value (referring to a set of socially desirable behaviours and attitudes, i.e., behaviours and attitudes which are considered good to adopt in all circumstances) and by people's awareness of this positive social value. Rubin and Peplau's studies (1973, 1975) provide various illustrations attesting the cultural aspect of the Belief in a Just World. Their reports allow us to consider that the Belief in a Just World can have a normative status. Thus, authors such as Beauvois and Le Poutier (1986), Dubois (1994, 2002), Jellison and Green (1981) considered the concept of internality, initially regarded as a personality trait, as referring to a social norm (the norm of internality). To test this assumption, they applied the judges paradigm and they observed a positive value of internal behaviours. Furthermore, they checked the awareness of this positive value and used the self-presentation paradigm and they observed the presence of this awareness. We present here a summary of the five first studies, based on four scales, which lead us to think that the Belief in a Just world can, similarly, be seen as a social norm, as

these studies also apply the judges paradigm (or its parallel form, the legislator paradigm) and the self-presentation paradigm<sup>1</sup>.

The first study (Gangloff, 2006) shows the positive social value of the Belief in a Just World, using the legislator paradigm and Rubin and Peplau's scale (1975). In the coherence of this research, and again with Rubin and Peplau's scale, Duchon and Gangloff (2006) using the self-presentation paradigm, confirmed the normative awareness of BJW. Using two other scales, the Personal BJW scale (Dalbert, 1999) and the General BJW scale (Dalbert, Montana, & Schmitt, 1987), Alves and Correia (2008) also showed, in a third study, the normative characteristic of the BJW. Lastly, using a BJW scale adapted to the professional environment (the BJW-Pro scale), this normativity was also highlighted in two other studies (Gangloff, 2008; Gangloff & Duchon, 2008, 2010).

## **2. First study: positive social value of the BJW with Rubin and Peplau's Scale (1975)**

Rubin and Peplau's BJW scale (1975) contains 20 items (9 just items and 11 unjust items). For instance (Item 1, unjust): "Good deeds go unnoticed and rewarded" and (Item 2, just): "Basically, the world is a just place".

As noted in the introduction section, the paradigm commonly used to ascertain the existence of a positive social value is the judges paradigm. Gangloff's research (2006) studies the social value of the BJW, using the Rubin and Peplau's BJW scale, but employing the legislator paradigm. Gangloff argues his choice for two reasons: one is theoretical, the second is methodological.

From a theoretical point of view, Gangloff (2006) notes that the work of the judge initially consists in comparing the observed behaviours with those defined by the law, then in saying if these behaviours enter or not within the framework of the law, and finally in sanctioning those which are illegal. The task of the judge does not consist in defining the law but in applying a law defined upstream by the legislator: it is the legislator who observes the whole of the possible behaviours and then enacts the law by proclaiming the normative behaviours (which are to be developed) and those which are counter-normative. In addition, on a methodological level, Gangloff (2006) estimates that the judges paradigm occults the possible existence of any key item that could determine alone the choice of the

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<sup>1</sup> The judges paradigm consists in presenting the fictitious answers, systematically or mainly opposed, provided by two persons to the same questionnaire, then to ask the evaluators to indicate their preference for one or the other. The self-presentation paradigm consists in offering participants, divided into 2 groups, a blank questionnaire, and then asking a subgroup to respond by providing the best self-image and the second subgroup to respond by trying to provide a negative self-image. The difference in responses between the two groups is considered to indicate the existence of a normative awareness.

evaluator. Overall, it would have the disadvantage of dissimulating the weight of each item. To indicate the existence of the norms, Gangloff (2006) suggests the use of the legislator paradigm instead of the judges paradigm. The legislator paradigm takes into account the weight of each item, and consists in requiring the evaluator to check, on a blank scale, the answers he estimated to be good answers and those he estimates to be bad answers.

In this study, Gangloff (2006) asked 37 recruiters to complete Rubin and Peplau's BJW scale (1975) according to the legislator paradigm. More precisely, the participants had to choose the answers they expected from a good candidate for an employment (the characteristics of the vacancy were not specified) and the answers they expected not to be present. Results show that recruiters choose mainly more answers going in direction of the BJW than answers going in the opposite direction ( $\chi^2(1, 31) = 5.45, p = .02$ ) (cf. Table 1). It is clear, at least with Rubin and Peplau's scale (1975), that the BJW leads to a positive social value<sup>2</sup>.

Table 1.

*Results of the BJW according to the legislator paradigm (N=37)*

Prefer the answers "belief in a just world" (more than 10 answers "belief" on 20)	22
Prefer the answers « belief in an unfair world » (less than 10 answers "belief" on 20)	9
As many answers "belief" as "no belief" (10 and 10)	6

### **3. Second study: normative awareness of the BJW with Rubin and Peplau's scale (1975)**

The study of Duchon and Gangloff (2006) brings additional information for the normativity of the BJW: this study ascertains the BJW normative awareness. Duchon and Gangloff (2006) used the self-presentation paradigm in which participants (60 unemployed of whom 30 men and 30 women) filled out the Rubin and Peplau's BJW scale (1975). Two different instructions were offered: members of one group had to complete the scale trying to present a favourable self-image, members of the other group had to complete the scale trying to present an unfavourable self-image (each group comprised 15 men and 15 women). Then, the authors compared the responses of the two groups using ANOVA.

Results (cf. Table 2) show that, globally, the participants filled out more BJW responses to give a positive image ( $M = 10.733$ ) versus a negative image ( $M = 9.367$ ;  $F(1,58) = 5.46, p = .02$ ). But a gender analysis points out that this difference is only observed among women: only women filled out the scale

<sup>2</sup> The legislator paradigm makes possible to observe the relative importance, in the choice of the 37 recruiters, of each of the 20 items of the used scale: each item does not lead to the same appreciation and this diversity would be attributed (Gangloff, 2006) to the multidimensionality of Rubin and Peplau's scale (1975).

significantly differently when they have to give a positive image ( $M = 11.4$ ) versus a negative one ( $M = 9$ ;  $F(1,28) = 11.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Results in this study provide evidence that the expression of a higher degree of BJW is perceived more desirable than the expression of a lower BJW. Importantly, these results are observed only among women.

Table 2.

*Means of the answers according to the consign ( $p < .05$  are noted in bold type). BJW scale varies between 0 and 20 (20 = maximum belief).*

	<b>Total (Men + Women)</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
<b>Positive image</b>	10.733	10.067	11.4
<b>Negative image</b>	9.367	9.733	9
<b>Difference</b>	1.367	0.334	2.4
<i>Fisher</i>	5.46	0.13	11.24
<b><i>P</i></b>	<b><i>p</i> = .02</b>	<i>p</i> = .72	<b><i>p</i> &lt; .01</b>

#### 4. Third study: normativity of the BJW with Dalbert's scales

Alves and Correia's (2008) goal is also to determine whether or not the expression of the BJW is normative. In the first part of their study, the authors used the judges paradigm and in the second part, they used the self-presentation paradigm. They used two scales: the General BJW scale (Dalbert et al., 1987) and the Personal BJW scale (Dalbert, 1999). For example, one item of the General BJW is "I basically think that the world is a just place", and one item of the Personal BJW scale is "I believe that I deserve what happens to me".

##### 4.1 First part: positive social value of the BJW

In the first part of the study, 50 Portuguese students (25 men and 25 women) were faced with the judges paradigm: they read the answers presumably filled in by two other students to either the General or the Personal BJW scale in the direction of high or low BJW. The experimental design was a 2 (sphere of BJW: General versus Personal) X 2 (degree of expressed BJW: high versus low). Then, participants had to indicate their opinions regarding the students using 12 adjectives, on a 7-points Likert scale.

Results provide evidence that, regardless of the scale, the expression of high BJW is more socially desirable than that of a low BJW. In others words: 1) participants evaluated the students who expressed high BJW more positively than the ones who expressed low BJW (respectively,  $M = 4.60$  and  $M = 3.69$ ;  $F(1,46) = 13.86$ ,  $p = .001$ ), and 2) participants showed greater willingness to meet the students who expressed high BJW than the ones who expressed low BJW (respectively  $M = 4.60$  and  $M = 3.36$ ;  $F(1,46) = 6.35$ ,  $p = .015$ ).

According to Alves and Correia (2008), participants evaluated more positively the students who expressed high BJW because they are seen more socially useful and desirable than the students who expressed low BJW.

#### **4.2 Second part: normative awareness of the BJW**

In the second part of their study, the authors used the self-presentation paradigm. The participants were 88 Portuguese students (39 men and 49 women). They completed either the General or the Personal BJW scale according to one of two instructions: to convey either a positive image of themselves or a negative one.

For General BJW, participants who had to provide a positive image of themselves are situated higher on the scale than participants who had to provide a negative image ( $M = 4.06$  versus  $M = 3.40$ ;  $p < .05$ ). For Personal BJW, scores in the positive image condition are also significantly higher than in the negative condition ( $M = 4.75$  versus  $M = 2.07$ ;  $p < .05$ ). These results offer support for participant's awareness regarding the desirability of expressing high levels of BJW compared to expressing lower levels of BJW.

Globally, this study suggests that the expression of higher BJW is more normative than the expression of lower BJW.

### **5. The normativity of expression of Belief Just World with a new scale of Belief Just World-Professional (BJW-Pro)**

#### **5.1 Presentation of BJW-Professional scale**

These previous studies show that the expression of higher BJW is more normative than the expression of lower BJW. Whereas, none of the used scales in the previous studies were specific to professional world. In addition, none of these studies used scales totally corresponding to the definition of BJW as it was proposed by Lerner and Simmons (1966). According to this definition, the BJW is viewed as “people get what they deserve and deserve what they get” (Lerner & Simmons, 1966, p. 204). Furthermore, according to Gangloff and Duchon (2008), the definition of BJW can be divided in two parts: 1. “People get what they deserve” means that when somebody deserves something (e.g., a promotion), he gets it. It is the “sanction of an action” with two possibilities:

a. If there is justice, people who do good things will be rewarded and people who do bad things will be punished;

b. If there is injustice, people who do good things will not be rewarded and people who do bad things will not be punished.

2. “People deserve what they get” means that when people get out something, they deserve it. It is the “justification of the sanction”. It also implies two possibilities:

c. If there is justice, when people are rewarded/punished it is because they committed good/bad things;

d. If there is injustice, people will be rewarded even if they did not committed good things and will be punished even if they did not committed bad things.

Taking these aspects into consideration, Gangloff and Duchon (2008) elaborated a BJW professional scale with three dimensions: justice (justice versus injustice) X reinforcement (reward versus punishment) X explication (sanction of action versus justification of sanction), that comprises eight situations (cf. Table 3). Each of these eight situations was declined in four professional areas: a work general theme, a second focused on getting a job, a third on promotion opportunities and a fourth on wages; finally a last theme (job loss) only concerned the four punitive implications. The scale includes a total of 36 items.

Table 3

*BJW-Pro scale codified according to variables justice, reinforcement and explanation.*

		<b>Reward</b>	<b>Punishment</b>
<b>Justice</b>	<b>Justification of sanction</b>	Received reward deserved (RRM)	Received punishment deserved (PRM)
	<b>Sanction of action</b>	Positive action rewarded (APR)	Negative action punished (ANP)
<b>Injustice</b>	<b>Justification of sanction</b>	Received reward not deserved (RRNM)	Received punishment not deserved (PRNM)
	<b>Sanction of action</b>	Positive action not rewarded (APNR)	Negative action not punished (ANNP)

The analyses carried out by Gangloff and Duchon (2008) took into account 171 employed individuals who completed this scale (in terms of agree or disagree). Participants were divided into four groups according to their gender and professional status: 88 men (48 employed and 40 unemployed) and 83 women (45 employed and 38 unemployed). The obtained answers were included in the analysis of reliability using the Kuder-Richardson test (KR20), coefficient which varies from 0 to 1, allowing us to judge the homogeneity of the scale. In addition, in order to supplement the Kuder-Richardson coefficients obtained, Fisher's ratios were calculated.

Results show (Table 4) that the consistency of the scale is acceptable (KR20 = .84;  $F(1,170) = 36.499, p \approx 0.000$ ). The BJW-Professional scale, where people get what they deserve and deserve what they get, is homogeneous. Indices on each under-dimension are also acceptable: under-dimension justice (with Kuder-Richardson of .77), under-dimension injustice (KR20 of .79), under-dimension justification of sanction (KR20 of .73), under-dimension sanction of action (KR20 of .74), and under-dimension reward (KR20 of .77). Under-dimension punishment



is the only one to introduce Kuder-Richardson lower at .70 (precisely of .68)<sup>3</sup>, but significant. To sum up, the BJW-Professional scale constitutes an homogeneous and consistent instrument.

Table 4

*Consistency of scale of BJW-professional. Probabilities lower at .05 are indicated in bold type.*

	<b>N items</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>KR20</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>P</b>
<b>Just World-Professional</b>	36	19.088	6.391	0.84	36.499	<b>.000</b>
<b>Justice</b>	18	9.953	3.680	0.77	46.902	<b>.000</b>
<b>Injustice</b>	18	9.135	3.947	0.79	33.180	<b>.000</b>
<b>Sanction of action</b>	18	9.789	3.528	0.73	33.535	<b>.000</b>
<b>Justification of sanction</b>	18	9.298	3.521	0.74	43.124	<b>.000</b>
<b>Reward</b>	16	8.942	3.513	0.77	34.047	<b>.000</b>
<b>Punishment</b>	20	10.146	3.412	0.68	39.362	<b>.000</b>

## 5.2 Fourth study: positive social value of the BJW using the BJW-Professional scale

In this study, Duchon and Gangloff (2008) examined the social value of the BJW using the BJW-Pro scale, asking recruiters to select items in order to convey a good or a bad candidate. 21 professional of recruitment (five men and sixteen women), resulting from the professions of orientation, professional insertion and human resources, completed this scale according to the legislator paradigm: they had to indicate the answers they awaited from a good candidate (that is to say the candidate they would recruit) and the answers that would lead them to don't recruit the candidate.

Results show that believing in a just world does not systematically result in being regarded more as a good candidate than as a bad one; however, the candidate who believes in an unjust world was systematically judged as being a bad candidate. More precisely, it is observed, on the "Justice" under-dimension, that in three out of four situations (significantly for two of them, and with a trend for the third one), the BJW answers are more chosen as answers coming from good candidates than coming from bad ones. On the other hand, for the answers corresponding to the "Injustice" under-dimension, it is noted, as well globally as for each of the four situations, that they are systematically and significantly regarded as answers provided by bad candidates. It is also noticed, by differentiating rewards and punishments, that the recruiters selected as being good candidates were those who regarded the received rewards as deserved and the positive acts as rewarded. Conversely, those who consider that received rewards are not deserved and that

<sup>3</sup> This result could be related to items referring to job loss. The scale has been simultaneously applied to employed and unemployed individuals, one can suppose that the latter were more reticent to decide in terms of justice.

positive acts are not rewarded are judged as being bad candidates. On the other hand, with the “punishment” under-dimension, one especially appreciates the candidates who consider that negative acts are punished (i.e., sanction of an action), but there is no difference with regard to the justification of the sanction (punishments deserved versus not deserved) of the negative acts. These results confirm the positive value of the BJW in professional settings and offer support for its components (received reward deserved).

### **5.3 Fifth study: normative awareness of the BJW using the BJW-Professional scale**

In another research, Gangloff and Duchon (2008, 2010) used the self-presentation paradigm in which 333 participants (salaried employee and job seekers, men and women, divided into four groups) completed the BJW-pro scale according to two instructions: to provide either a positive or a negative self-image (154 participants for the positive image and 174 for the negative image). Regardless of participants' status and gender, results indicate that participants' scores are higher with a positive image than with a negative one. These results show that the participants interiorized the idea that it exists, in professional environment, a social value of the belief in justice.

To sum up, these two last studies indicate that the expression of higher BJW-Pro is more normative than the expression of lower BJW-Pro.

## **6. Discussion and conclusion**

Rubin and Peplau (1975) were the first to evoke the Belief in a Just World as a cultural belief. Primarily shared and diffused in western societies, it belongs, according to these authors, to a social learning belief. Our children are thought that the world is just, that rewards are related to virtue and that bad acts lead to punishments. Within the framework of children's cognitive and moral development, Piaget (1965) and Kohlberg (1963) show that young children (6-8 years) believe that a fault involves automatically a punishment and that overall the adults are able to define what is good and bad (so that if an adult punishes a child it is the proof that the child was faulty). Adults teach their children this belief in order to encourage them to work and respect the authority and the institutions. Progressively, this belief is reduced as a result of cognitive development and confrontation with misfortunes and iniquities, but it still remains present in adulthood, thus allowing the perpetuation of the social system. So it is not surprising the thought of conferring this concept a normative statute.

The Belief in a Just World also makes possible to understand the complexity of the relations which link the individual and the innocent victim of Lerner. The BJW acts as a cognitive rampart allowing us to rationalize and explain

what happens to the victim while being protected against the idea to suffer the same fate. Dalbert (2009) underlines the adaptive function of the BJW for preserving the psychic balance of the individual: if the world is unjust, then the fate can, tomorrow, strike us as it strikes the victim today. On the other hand, if the world is just, then the victim is responsible for its fate. This type of conceptualization can explain why people can, condemn the injustice (Dubet, 2006) but at the same time, use passive strategies when they witness injustices. Hence, the BJW allows us to accept injustices (Hafer & Olson, 1998) and perpetuates passivity concerning the victims of injustices. It comes as no surprise that this concept has been viewed as a normative one: its social utility seems obvious.

In the first studies that we presented, Gangloff (2006), as well as Duchon and Gangloff (2006) used Rubin and Peplau's scale (1975) and highlighted the BJW's positive value and people's awareness of this positive value. Nevertheless, using the Personal Just World scale developed by Dalbert (1999) and the General Just World scale developed by Dalbert et al. (1987), Alves and Correia (2008) showed that BJW leads to positive social value and that people are aware of this positive value. Lastly, the last two studies, with the Belief Just World-Professional scale, whose construction translated the various implications of the Just World theory, led to the same results. Namely, Duchon and Gangloff (2008) observed that recruiters prefer to select candidates with high BJW-Pro. Furthermore, Gangloff and Duchon (2008, 2010) noted the awareness of this positive value, as well in part of salaried employee as unemployed. So, this first review suggests that the Belief in a Just World can be seen as a social norm, which is not without consequences, so much from a theoretical point of view than from a social one.

From a theoretical perspective, this normative statute provides an explanation regarding the process of emergence of this belief, and thus a better understanding of the reasons of individual differences in its internalization. As from an applied perspective, if one refers to the common characteristics of social norms, including their value and their acquired emergence, it provides a voluntary social diffusion of this belief, which has ethical consequences (if we consider that the development of this belief could, by its individual functions, increase social adjustment, and by its social utility, lead to a greater acceptance of social injustice).

However, we should take into consideration the limits of the studies we have presented, especially from the point of view of results generalization. For instance, it is possible that the evaluative context or the socio-cultural background of the participants plays a role in these results. One possible research direction could be to investigate if one or both of these two aspects modulate the normative character of this belief. For example, concerning the evaluative setting, studying the value of this belief in participants working in an NGO fighting for human rights versus of participants working for wealthy merchant banks. For the second aspect, investigating the cultural variations of this normativity, firstly by making international comparisons, secondly by examining the correlations between this

normativity and individual's cultural values (individualism/collectivism). Several perspectives are possible, and for each of them, both theoretical and practical implications are available.

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