Is it Desirable or Useful to Believe in a Just World?

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Abstract

Recent studies have lately highlighted the normative character of the belief in a just world. Conferring an object the status of a social norm means assigning value (in terms of desirability and utility) to that object. So we questioned the value assigned to the belief in a just world. 170 employees were therefore interrogated on the desirability and utility they would attribute to a future work colleague (future peer or subordinate) based on the responses the latter was supposed to have given to a questionnaire on the belief in a just world. It turns out that believers in a just world are almost always preferred to non-believers, both in terms of desirability, as well as utility, regardless of their future status (peer *vs.* subordinate). This result thus confirms the normativity of the belief in a just world.

Keywords: beliefs, social desirability, social utility, judgments, actions,

Introduction

The belief in a just world (or in an orderly world) refers to the idea that "what happens to an individual would necessarily be the accurate and just counterpart of what they do or who they are" (Chalot, 1980: 52). It is based on the consideration that "people get what they deserve and deserve what they get" (Lerner & Simmons, 1966: 204). It postulates that positive events happen to good people and negative events to negative people. In everyday life, the manifestations of this belief are numerous. Therefore, Myrdal (1944) notes that we often justify the treatment of oppressed groups by claiming that they deserve their fate. Goffman (1963) ascertains that we often consider a physical disability to be the proof of moral imperfection, the just retribution of a fault of the victim or their parents. On

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the positive side, Rubin and Peplau (1975) note that the tendency to congratulate the "winners" seems very common, success being often considered a sign of virtue: of someone who wins the lottery, the newspapers often write that they were a hardworking person, endowed with admirable qualities, who deserves their good fortune, as if buying the right ticket had to be justified. As a corollary, the idea that positive actions are rewarded is also underlined by Kubler-Ross (1969), who note that the dying frequently promise to donate their bodies to science if the doctors attempt to prolong their lives.

Studies on the belief in a just world were mainly initiated by Heider's observations on the tendency we have to relate virtue and reward and vice and punishment (Heider, 1958). A few years later, these observations led Lerner and his collaborators to conduct the first experimental works on this belief. Lerner (1965) also shows that witnesses invited to judge on the performance of two partners who equally participated to a common task, but of which only one was rewarded, attributed to the latter the better performance, even if the observers knew that such reward was the object of a draw. Thus, against all evidence, a positive sanction received is considered to be the consequence of a positive behaviour (in this case, a performance) of its beneficiary. In a second study (Lerner & Simmons, 1966), students are forced to observe another student who, for altruistic reasons, that is to say, without being obliged in any way, accepts to participate to a verbal learning task during which he/she receives electrical shocks in case of error. The students must then evaluate the other student on 15 bipolar scales (kind, mature...). It was found that the more the suffering was prolonged and the less the subjects were able to help the victim to end his/her suffering, the more negative the feedback provided was. Thus, when we cannot rescue a victim or assign precise misdeeds to them, we devalue them; we consider that they deserved their suffering (for example, due to personality features). Many studies have subsequently confirmed the validity of this belief (Chaikin & Darley, 1973; Comby, Devos & Deschamps, 1995; Godfrey & Lowe, 1975; Jones & Aronson, 1973; Lerner, 1977, 1980; Lerner & Matthews, 1967; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Miller, 1977; Mills & Egger, 1972; Simons & Piliavin, 1972; Regan, 1971; Zuckerman, 1975).

Various questionnaires have been developed in order to measure the degree of belief in a just world (*for e.g.,* Dalbert, 1999; Dalbert, Montana & Schmitt, 1987; Furnham & Procter, 1992; Lipkus, 1991; Mohiyeddini & Montana, 1998; Maes, 1992; Maes & Kals, 2002; Rubin & Peplau, 1973, 1975). Their application has led to several conclusions. For example, it has been observed that not everyone reacts systematically as if the world were just: depending on the situation, certain people recognize that the world is unjust and attribute misfortunes to social context or to an arbitrary fate, especially when the suffering they observe touches them or is likely to touch them directly (see for example Aderman, Brehm & Katz, 1974; or Chaikin & Darley, 1973). It was also found that the belief in a just world is

correlated with other variables. We thus observe a strong correlation with submission to authoritarianism (meaning, to authority), with the tendency to idealize leaders, to value the strong and powerful, and to consider the feeble people to be bad (Lerner, 1973; Rubin & Peplau, 1973). Zuckerman and Gerbasi (1975) also show that people with a high level of belief in a just world are more confident in others; Fink and Guttenplan (1975) make a similar observation, noting a good correlation between the belief in a just world and Rotter's scale of Interpersonal Trust (1967), these correlations reflecting a positive connection between the belief in a just world and the uncritical acceptance of authority. The data collected by Connors and Heaven (1987), Fink and Guttenplan (1975), Peplau and Tyler (1975), or by Zuckerman and Gerbasi (1975a) confirm this link, observing a correlation between the belief in a just world and the support given to powerful political and social institutions; political conservatism; lack of suspicion and cynicism related to government activities. It is also found that the belief in a just world allows us to accept injustices (Hafer & Olson, 1998) and perpetuates the *status quo* (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). We therefore notice negative correlations between the belief in a just world and social activism (Rubin & Peplau, 1973).

It was also shown that this belief is subject to a social valuation (job applicants who show a strong belief in a just world are more frequently selected: *acc.* to Gangloff, 2006) and, on a more general level, that it can be considered a social norm (Gangloff & Duchon, 2010). Now, when an object is socially valued and can be granted the status of a norm means that such object has value, that is to say (*acc.* to Beauvois, Dubois & Peeters, 1999) that it is desirable (or agreeable) and useful. Here, desirability would refer to the agreeable, attractive, pleasant nature of each characteristic of the object assessed, and utility to the faculty of each of those characteristics that would allow the object to achieve its objectives (Peeters, 1986, speaks of "profitability for oneself"), or that would allow society, as a whole, to achieve its objectives (Beauvois, 1995, speaks of "social utility"). Therefore, at least in terms of utility, there would be one differentiation on the conceptual level. However, this differentiation would not be found on an empirical level: according to a study by Cambon, Djouary and Beauvois (2006), the characteristics profitable for oneself would be equally useful for the society. As to the relationships between desirability and utility, they remain unknown: Le Barbenchon and col. (2005), underline that the results obtained based on such relationships are contradictory, some showing positive correlations, others negative correlations and yet others the total absence of correlations.

Several scales were used when measuring this value. Thus, in order to measure the value of a person characterized by certain personological features or who exercises a particular profession, Le Barbenchon, Cambon and Lavigne (2005) have used 4 scales (two of desirability and two of utility). For desirability, they asked their participants whether a target characterized by a certain adjective "has

everything they need in order to be loved" (*vs.* "has nothing they need in order to be loved") and "has many friends" (*vs.* "has few friends"); for utility, they asked the participants to indicate whether the target "has everything they need in order to succeed in their professional life" (*vs.* "has nothing they need in order to succeed in their professional life") and "has a high wage" (*vs.* "has a low wage"). Mazilescu, Abdellaoui and Gangloff (2012) have followed a different procedure and they asked their participants to indicate the value they attribute to a person owning a particular personological feature referring to the Big Five dimensions. To this end, they used the following two scales: "agreeable, indifferent or disagreeable" (for desirability), and "useful, useless or interfering" (for utility).

These two scales were also used in a study of Gangloff (2010), which interests us directly, because it dealt with the value attributed to obtaining information regarding the level of belief of a future colleague in a just world. More precisely, it dealt with indicating if obtaining information on the level of belief of that colleague in a just world was perceived as agreeable or useful. And it was observed that even if such information might be disagreeable (which proved to be the case especially when such information revealed the absence of a belief in a just world), it was generally considered useful (particularly because it allowed, within the framework of future interactions with that colleague, to anticipate the latter's reactions). On the other hand, it also appeared that such judgments (which attested the independence between desirability and utility) varied according to whether the target to be evaluated was a future subordinate or a future peer (with especially more open judgments of agreeability/disagreeability when it concerned a peer than when it concerned a subordinate). A limitation of this study was that it excluded the study of the value attributed to the belief in a just world: its objective was only to examine the value attributed to the fact of knowing one will work with a colleague who believes (*vs.* who does not believe) in a just world; to examine whether it is agreeable or useful to know that we will be working with a colleague who believes (*vs.* who does not believe) in a just world (and not to examine whether working with a colleague who believes or who does not believe in a just world was perceived as agreeable or useful). It also seemed relevant to examine the value attributed to this belief in itself, therefore we asked: is having to work with a colleague who believes (*vs.* who does not believe) in a just world considered agreeable (or useful); or, more simply put, is a colleague who believes (*vs.* who does not believe) in a just world considered to be an agreeable colleague (or a useful colleague)? Moreover, taking into consideration that the results of Gangloff (2010) varied according to the status of the target to be evaluated, we have also considered that the value granted to this belief may vary depending on whether the target was a subordinate or a peer.

Method

We asked 170 employees, which we contacted at their place of work, to answer, voluntarily, to two items (the first on desirability and the second on utility), starting from the answers that their future colleague was supposed to have given to a questionnaire on the belief in a just world, during a skills assessment. Thus, the respondents, after taking knowledge of those responses, where to assess their future colleague, in terms of desirability on the one hand and in terms of utility on the other hand.

Our pool consisted more precisely of 89 respondents with subordinates under their command (of which 50 were faced with the profile of a future subordinate who believes in a just world and 39 with the profile of a future subordinate who does not believe in a just world) and 81 respondents lacking a hierarchical responsibility (of which 40 were faced with the profile of a future peer who believes in a just world and 41 with that of a future peer who does not believe in a just world).

The questionnaire to which this future colleague was supposed to have answered is the questionnaire specific to the world of work developed by Gangloff and Duchon in 2010. It includes 36 items referring to 5 professional themes (the first being the general theme of the world of work, the second one centering on obtaining a job, the third one on promotion possibilities, the forth one on wages and the last one on the loss of a job), half of the items being formulated based on the belief in a just world and the other 18 based on the contrary idea. In addition to its central purpose, the questionnaire also takes into consideration the two facets of the definition of BJW as formulated by Lerner and Simmons in 1966. This definition (according to which "people get what they deserve and deserve what they get", Lerner & Simmons, 1996: 204) may indeed be split into two parts. The first one ("people get what they deserve"), which can be classified as "sanction for action", refers to the fact that positive actions are rewarded and that negative actions are sanctioned; the second one ("people deserve what they get"), which corresponds to the "justification of the sanction", means that the sanctions received, be they positive or negative, are deserved. Half of the 36 items of the questionnaire used refer to the first facet (for example: "Job seekers who really bother to look for a job will most of the times find one"), and the other half to the second side (for example: "Unemployed people who find a job often deserve it").

These were the instructions given to the respondents: "In the following questionnaire, you are asked to imagine that you will soon have a new work colleague (vs. a new subordinate). You have very little information on this person: you do not know if they are male or female, or their age, etc. In the following pages you can however read some answers this person has given to a questionnaire during a skills assessment. You learn, for example, that this person has said: "I am a

dynamic, ambitious person, who loves challenges". You will then have to indicate: on the one hand if you find this person agreeable, indifferent or disagreeable, and to explain why; and on the other hand if you believe that person will be useful, useless, or, on the contrary that they would interfere with your work, and explain why".

Results

The analyses of the results obtained (*acc.* to *Table 1* and *Table 2*) underline an effect of the status and an effect of the belief in a just world, and the absence of any significant interaction between these 2 variables.

Table 1. *Distribution of responses obtained (occurrences)*

		Desirability				Utility			
		+	0	-	total	+	0	-	total
Believer	Peer	18	10	12	40	21	9	10	40
	Sub	27	16	7	50	32	12	6	50
	Total	45	26	19	90	53	21	16	90
Non-believer	Peer	5	18	18	41	6	17	18	41
	Sub	9	20	10	39	13	19	7	39
	Total	14	38	28	80	19	36	25	80
Total	Peer	23	28	30	81	27	26	28	81
	Sub	36	36	17	89	45	31	13	89
	Total	59	64	47	170	72	57	41	170

Table 2. *Distribution of responses obtained (means)*

		Desirability				Utility			
		+	0	-	total	+	0	-	total
Believer	Peer	0.45	0.25	0.3	2.15	0.52	0.22	0.25	2.28
	Sub	0.54	0.32	0.14	2.40	0.64	0.24	0.12	2.52
	Total	0.50	0.29	0.21	2.29	0.59	0.23	0.18	2.41
Non-believer	Peer	0.12	0.44	0.44	1.68	0.15	0.41	0.44	1.71
	Sub	0.23	0.51	0.26	1.97	0.33	0.49	0.18	2.15
	Total	0.17	0.47	0.35	1.82	0.24	0.45	0.31	1.92
Total	Peer	0.28	0.35	0.37	1.91	0.33	0.32	0.35	1.99
	Sub	0.40	0.40	0.19	2.21	0.51	0.35	0.15	2.36
	Total	0.35	0.38	0.28		0.42	0.34	0.24	

The means vary from 0 (low frequency of occurrence) to 1 (high frequency) for positive, neutral or negative judgments, and from 0 to 3 for the totals.

The Effect of the Status

It appears first of all, both in terms of desirability, as well as utility, that the judgments passed on a future subordinate are more favourable than those passed on a future peer. Therefore, in terms of desirability, the frequency of favourable judgments passed on subordinates (M = 2.21) is significantly higher than that of judgments passed on peers (M = 1.91), $F(1.168) = 5.51$; $p = 0.02$; $d = 0.39$. The same is true for utility, with M = 2.36 (for subordinates) and M = 1.99 (for peers), or $F(1.168) = 9.08$; $p = 0.003$; $d = 0.47$.

For desirability, these differences come from a lower frequency of negative judgments passed on subordinates than on peers (respectively M = 0.19 and M = 0.37, or $F(1.168) = 6.42$; $p = 0.012$; $d = 0.41$, and for utility, both from a lower frequency of negative judgments passed on subordinates as compared to peers (respectively M = 0.15 and M = 0.35, or $F(1.168) = 9.26$; $p = .002$; $d = 0.47$, as well as from a higher frequency of positive judgments passed on the same subordinates as compared to peers (respectively M = 0.51 and M = 0.33, or $F(1.168) = 4.52$; $p = 0.035$; $d = 0.37$.

Two other significant differences occur according to the status and related to future collaborators who do not believe in a just world: it appears that the negative utility judgments passed on subordinates (M = 0.18) are less frequent than those passed on peers (M = 0.44), or $F(1.78) = 6.66$; $p = 0.011$; $d = 0.58$; this data then leads to overall utility judgments more favourable for subordinates who do not believe (M = 2.15), than for peers who do not believe (M = 1.71) in a just world, or $F(1.78) = 7.62$; $p = 0.007$; $d = 0.62$.

Effect of the belief in a just world

However, our main interest was the potential effect of the belief in a just world. Therefore, our results show numerous significant differences, with judgments passed on the collaborators who believe in a just world being almost always more favourable than those passed on non-believers.

On a global level, believers are in fact judged more favourably than non-believers, both in terms of desirability (respectively M = 2.29 and M = 1.82; $F(1.168) = 14.98$; $p \approx 0.00$; $d = 0.62$) as well as utility (respectively M = 2.41 and M = 1.92; $F(1.168) = 16.55$; $p \approx 0.00$; $d = 0.64$). In terms of desirability, these differences come both from more positive evaluations of believers as compared to non-believers (respectively M = 0.5 and M = 0.17; $F(1.168) = 21.09$; $p \approx 0.00$; $d = 0.73$), and from a lower frequency of neutral judgments passed on the former (M = 0.29 versus M = 0.47; $F(1.168) = 6.66$; $p = 0.01$; $d = 0.39$), and even from a tendency of a lower frequency of negative judgments passed on the former (M = 0.21 versus M = 0.35; $F(1.168) = 3.57$; $p = 0.06$). As for the results on utility,

they follow an identical pattern, with the differences coming both from more positive evaluations on believers as compared to nonbelievers (respectively M = 0.59 and M = 0.24; F(1.168) = 23.25; p ≈ 0.00; d = 0.76) and from a lower frequency of neutral judgments on the former (M=0.23 versus M = 0.45; F(1.168) = 9.31; p = 0.003; d = 0.47) and equally from a lower frequency of negative judgments on the former (M= 0.18 versus 0.31; F(1.168) = 3.97; p = 0.047; d = 0.3). These results apply to both future subordinates, as well as future peers.

Thus, in what concerns subordinates, believers are always better assessed than nonbelievers, both in terms of desirability (respectively M = 2.4 versus 1.97; F(1.87) = 7.84; p = 0.006; d = 0.6), as well as utility (M = 2.52 and M = 2.15; F(1.87) = 5.99; p = 0.02; d = 0.52). In terms of desirability, this preference is the result of a higher frequency of positive judgments passed on believers (M = 0.54 as opposed to M = 0.23 for non-believers; F(1.87) = 9.48; p = 0.002; d = 0.66). In terms of utility, it comes both from a higher frequency of positive judgments passed on believers (M = 0.64 as opposed to 0.33 for non-believers; F(1.87) = 9.06; p = 0.03; d = 0.64) as well as from fewer neutral judgments passed on the former as compared to the latter (respectively M = 0.24 and M = 0.49; F(1.87) = 6.33; p = 0.01; d = 0.53).

In what concerns future peers, believers are also always better evaluated than nonbelievers, both in terms of desirability (respectively M = 2.15 as opposed to 1.68; F(1.79) = 7.43; p = 0.007; d = 0.6), as well as utility (M = 2.28 and M = 1.71; F(1.79 = 10.83; p = 0.001; d = 0.73). For desirability, this preference comes essentially from a higher frequency of positive judgments passed on the believers (M = 0.45) than on non-believers (M = 0.12), F(1.79 = 12.28; p ≈ 0.00; d = 0.77). The same result applies to utility, with equally more positive judgments passed on believers (M = 0.52) than on non-believers (M = 0.125), F(1.79 = 14.61; p ≈ 0.00; d = 0.84) and an equal tendency of less negative judgments passed on believers as compared to non-believers (respectively M = 0.25 and M = 0.44, F(1.79 = 3.28, p = 0.07).

Conclusions

It appears first of all, regardless of the level of belief in a just world, and both in terms of desirability, as well as utility, that the judgments passed on a future subordinate are more favourable than those passed on a future peer. In other words, this means that our respondents are more demanding when it comes to their expectations from a future collaborator of the same hierarchical level than from a future subordinate. It is also noted, in terms of utility, that this difference is even greater when it relates to future collaborators who do not believe in a just world. This result confirms those of Gangloff's study (2010), where the judgments

of agreeability/disagreeability were more assertive when they targeted a peer than when they targeted a subordinate.

Turning now to our main question, that is to say, the effect of the belief in a just world, our results underline numerous significant differences proving almost always more favourable judgments passed on future collaborators who believe in a just world as compared to future non-believers, both in terms of desirability, as well as utility. We also observed that these results concern both future subordinates, as well as future peers. In the introduction we mentioned several works that indicate that the belief in a just world leads to social valuation (Gangloff, 2006) and that it could thus be conferred the status of social norm (Gangloff & Duchon, 2010). We have also mentioned that in order to confer an objet the status of a social norm we have to attribute value (in terms of desirability and utility) to that object (*acc.* to Beauvois, Dubois & Peeters, 1999). These results thus confirm this attribution of value. We also underline that the differences observed between believers and non-believers in a just world come not as much from more frequent negative judgments passed on non-believers, but rather from more positive judgments passed on believers: therefore there would not be any real stigmatization of non-believers, but rather a valuation of believers in a just world. Perhaps we can consider this a preference (in terms of agreeability and utility) to working with collaborators who believe in a just world, while considering non-believers to be realists, which leads to a lack of further criticism. But such an interpretation would evidently require to be confirmed by complementary studies.

We should however list a number of limitations of these results. The main one concerns the absence of any contextualization in what regards the job position held by the future collaborator. It is obvious that expectations may differ according to the type of position exercised by such a future collaborator, be it a future peer or a future subordinate. It would then be appropriate, in a later study, to refine this aspect and to vary the job position in order to operationalize the form of the independent variable. Another limitation relates to the manner of formulating our items of belief/non-belief in a just world: these items are presented in a general, impersonal form. It would undoubtedly be interesting to examine whether similar results would be obtained when using a personal formulation, featuring the personal story of the future collaborator. However, we mention that we used the Gangloff and Duchon scale (2010), the only scale specific to the world of work that operationalizes the two facets of the definition of belief in a just world ("people get what they deserve and deserve what they get" (Lerner and Simmons, 1966: 204)). A similar scale, but with a personal form, is still to be developed.

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