Belief in a Just World and Coping with Injustice in Intimate Relationships

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Abstract:
Aim: According to the just world hypothesis, people want to and have to believe they live in a just world so that they can go about their daily lives with a sense of trust, hope, and confidence in their future (Lerner, 1980). Justice can be seen as a key issue in intimate relationships. People want to be treated justly and consider justice to be one of the most important attributes of a good intimate relationship. Social justice research has shown that people respond with negative attitudes and behaviors when they perceive unjust treatment or situations. However, belief in a just world is associated with a positive coping style (Dalbert & Filke, 2007). The aim of this contribution is to examine the level of the belief in a just world (personal and general), find out which strategy is most used when people cope with injustice in intimate relationships, and analyze the relation between the belief in a just world and particular coping strategies.
Method: 117 respondents (66 women and 51 men) with an average age of 21.60 years (SD = 1.54) answered the questions measuring coping strategies in the Coping with Injustice in Intimate Relationships Questionnaire (Dotazník zvládania nespravodlivosti v partnerskom vzťahu, Rovenská & Lovaš, 2017) and belief in a just world in the General Belief in a Just World Scale and Personal Belief in a Just World Scale (Dalbert, Montada, & Schmitt, 1987). The sample included heterosexual, childfree relationships. The average length of relationship was 28.00 months (SD = 19.88). Participation was voluntary, and all participants were treated in accordance with the ethical guidelines.
Results: The results showed significant differences in belief in a just world ($t_{116} = 4.07; p < .001$). Respondents had a stronger personal belief in a just world than general belief in a just world ($M_{GBJW} = 3.96; SD = .85$, $M_{PBJW} = 3.08; SD = .84$). Furthermore, cooperation was the most common strategy used to cope with injustice in romantic relationships ($M = 4.61; SD = .85$). There was no significant relationship between belief in a just world and coping with injustice.
Conclusion: The paper dealt with the concept of belief in a just world and coping with injustice in intimate relationships. The paper defined the character of the belief in a just world and clarified that personal BJW is more significant for individuals than general BJW. The present paper also showed that cooperation was the most used coping strategy through dealing with injustice in intimate relationships. The main aim of the contribution was to analyse the relationship between the belief in a just world and selected coping strategies used in unjust situations. The results showed the was no significant relationship between the belief in a just world and coping strategies. Our findings are inconsistent with the Montada and Lerner study (1998), in which the belief in a just world was associated with constructive coping strategies. The reason for inconsistent results can be found in the nature of the belief in a just world. Dzuka and Dalbert (2000) point out that the belief in a just world could be a positive and healthy coping strategy in itself. The belief in a just world is a stabilizing force that helps one deals...
Belief in a Just World and Coping with Injustice in Intimate Relationships

with daily hassles (Dalbert, 1998). The belief in a just world could be found as a major coping strategy (Fuhrman, 2003) or as a personal coping resource influencing the coping process in different ways and protect victims from ruminating (Dalbert, 1998).

Key words: Justice. Belief in a just world. Coping with injustice in intimate relationships.

Introduction

If we believe the world is a just place, we also believe that everyone gets everything that they deserve from their own deeds. According to Hellman et al. (2008) the belief in a just world is an argument representing the world as a just place where a person gets what they deserve and deserve as much as they give to the world. Every human act results in a foreseeable consequence.

Lerner (1980) hypothesized about the functions of the belief in a just world in his book „The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion“ and suggested that people have a need to believe that the environment is a just and orderly place where people usually get what they deserve.

Lerner (1980) proposed that individuals need to believe in a just world to deal with witnessed or experienced injustice, helplessness, and insecurity. The just world theory assumes that people want to believe that they live in a world where good things happen to good people and bad things only to bad ones. This belief is essential for people to feel safe and to perceive the world as a predictable and manageable place (Lerner, 1980).

Accordingly, Hafer (2002) argues that individuals have an implicit need to believe that good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people, which implies that justice is framed in terms of deservingness. Moreover, he proposes that the function of belief in a just world is to allow one to invest in long-term goals and to do so according to society’s rules of deservingness (Hafer, 2002).

The belief in a just world seems to provide psychological buffers against the harsh realities of the world, as well as personal control over one’s own destiny. People feel less personally vulnerable and have a lower perception of risk because they believe they have done nothing to deserve negative outcomes. Furthermore, the developmental and life-span literature suggests that belief in a just world is fairly stable across one's life-span (Furnham, 2003). The belief in a just world is often seen as a personality trait with dispositional variations (Furnham, 2003; Dalbert, 2009; Hafer & Sutton, 2016). The research also suggests that males and females do not meaningfully differ in their belief in a just world (Durm & Stowers, 1998; O’Connor et al., 1996).

As it was stated, Lerner (1980) refers to the belief in a just world as a fundamental delusion. A "fundamental" belief in the sense that it is essential for most people to maintain their sense of sanity and security and a "delusion" in the sense that the world is not always just and orderly.

Lipkus, Dalbert and Siegler (1996) suggest that it is necessary to distinguish the belief in a personal just world from the belief in a general just world. The general belief in a just world leads individual to believe that people generally live in a just world, while the personal belief in a just world concerns whether they are personally fairly treated (Dalbert, 1999).

The personal belief in a just world is more important than the general belief in a just world (Dalbert, 2009). However, it is also hypothesized that the personal and the general belief in a just world are primitive beliefs and their importance is lost in adulthood (Wu et al., 2011).
According to Oppenheimer (2006), the general belief in a just world would lose its importance much earlier and to a greater extent than the personal belief in a just world, and would be replaced by more sophisticated forms of reasoning and justification that allow individuals to manage an unjust world.

These distinguishing patterns between personal belief in a just world and general belief in a just world led Bégué and Bastounis (2003) to propose that they could be considered distinct spheres of the belief in a just world, although somewhat correlated. Many authors stress the importance of distinguishing the personal and the general belief in a just world because individuals’ scores are systematically higher for the personal than for the general belief in a just world (Dalbert, 1999; Lipkus et al., 1996; Wenzel, Schindler, & Reinhard, 2017). An adequate explanation could be found in the idea that the endorsement of the personal rather than the general belief in a just world is more fundamental for the individual’s well-being (Lipkus et al., 1996), interpersonal trust (Bégué & Bastounis, 2003) or prosocial behavior (Bégué, 2014).

Moreover, social psychologists have argued that the belief in a just world is a powerful personal resource influencing the coping process in different ways (Hafer & Sutton, 2016; Dalbert, 1998, 2001; Rubin & Peplau, 1975). It was concluded that the belief in a just world can affect an array of stress-related processes over the long term, including buffering emotional stress, protecting physical health, and improving achievement motivation. The belief in a just world is therefore considered an important healthy factor in moderating the experience of challenge and threat in potentially stressful situations (Furnham, 2003).

The belief in a just world plays an important role in the process of coping with injustice. Several studies have highlighted the fact that individuals who believe in a just world cope effectively with stressful situations such as a partner’s unfairness (Dalbert, 1993; Lerner & Somers, 1992).

The importance of the belief in a just world can vary among people. As Rubin and Peplau (1975) state; the higher the belief in a just world is, the more the reactions to different life events are motivated by justice. The research has identified several coping strategies in the context of injustice. In particular, it is possible to mention strategies as rationalizing, helping victims of injustice or blaming the victim for their own suffering (Hafer & Gosses, 2011).

Nevertheless, coping strategies that people use when they have been harmed by a loved one may be more specific because these strategies describe coping in the frame of interaction (the synergistic nature of coping). Rusbuldt (1993) considers that coping strategies used in unjust situations are defined by two fundamental dimensions: (1) constructive / destructive and (2) active / passive. Constructive strategies are associated with an open mind; conflict parties provide each other with space for emotional expression, clarifying their thoughts, and showing an effort to bring the conflict to a solution that is more or less acceptable to both parties (e.g. expressing opinions or loyalty). On the other hand, destructive strategies are often accompanied by higher intensity of aggressive and/or explosive reactions (e.g. ignorance, avoidance). The destructive strategies end up unfavorably for one party or for both of them.

Lipkus & Bissonnette (1998) looked at the relationship between the belief in a just world and coping strategies used by couples (married and dating) in the conflict situations. The authors tried to find out how people in intimate relationships deal with conflict; specifically the willingness to accommodate which is the more constructive response to a partner’s negative (unjust) behavior. They hypothesized that individuals with higher belief in a just world would be more likely to perceive their partner as acting in a manner consistent with themes of deservingness and therefore expect that their own accommodation will be reciprocated for the long-term well-being of the relationship. The results found support for the authors’ thesis
suspecting that both the stage of the relationship and the established and “routinized” methods of handling conflict might suppress the effects of the belief in a just world.

The relationship between the belief in a just world and coping with injustice shows that individuals with a high belief in a just world are more willing to adapt and therefore use constructive strategies (Montada & Lerner, 1998). Furthermore, the authors point out that individuals who have a higher belief in a just world, trust their partner more, are more open-minded through coping with an unfair situation, and consider their partner as more flexible. Individuals who believe in a just world are more willing to use constructive strategies if their partner's behavior is unfair (Montada & Lerner, 1998).

The aim of the study is examine the level of the belief in a just world (personal and general), find out which strategy is most used when people cope with injustice in intimate relationship and analyze the relation between the belief in a just world and particular coping strategies.

**Method**

**Participants**

The sample consisted of 117 participants (51 men and 66 women). Participants aged from 19 to 25 years (M = 21.60, SD = 1.54). Regarding gender, women were 22.00 years old (SD = 1.63), men were 21.30 years old (SD = 1.40). There were 115 respondents cohabiting with a partner, while 2 respondents were married. 17 participants shared the same household with a partner and 100 participants lived in separate households. The sample included heterosexual, childfree relationships. The average length of relationship was 28.00 months (SD = 19.88). Participation was voluntary, and all participants were treated in accordance with the ethical guidelines.

**Measurements**

Demographic questionnaire – the questionnaire included questions which ascertain age, gender, length and type of relationship, number of children and type of household.

General Belief In A Just World Scale and Personal Belief In A Just World Scale (Dalbert, Montada, & Schmitt, 1987; slovak version Džuka, 2001) - General Belief In A Just World Scale consists of 6 items (“I think basically the world is a just place”). Personal Belief In A Just World Scale was measured with 7 items (“I am usually treated fairly”). The items are formulated as statements and are measured on a 6-point scale (1 = strongly agree, 6 = strongly disagree). A higher score indicates a lower belief in a just world. Cronbach’s alpha values were: (a) general belief in a just world .58 and (b) personal belief in a just world .81.

Coping with Injustice in Intimate Relationships Questionnaire (Dotazník zvládania nespravodlivosti v partnerskom vzťahu, Rovenská & Lovaš, 2017) – the self-report instrument is designed to measure coping strategies used in unjust situations in intimate relationships. The instrument includes 5 dimensions: (a) cooperation, (b) assertivity, (c) revenge, (d) instrumental support and (e) nonchalance. 38 items are formulated as the statements and the response options are delivered on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (to a small extent) to 6 (to a large extent). Cronbach’s alpha values were: (a) cooperation .87, (b) assertivity .78, (c) revenge .54, (d) instrumental support .62, (e) nonchalance .64.
Results

The belief in a just world and its dimensions

Paired samples t-test (general BJW vs. personal BJW) revealed that personal BJW score was significantly higher than general BJW (personal BJW: M = 3.08, SD = .84; general BJW: M = 3.96, SD = .85; t(116) = 4.07; p < .001) (higher score indicates lower belief in a just world). In other words, respondents had a higher belief in their own control over their just destiny rather than the belief that the world is generally a just place.

Coping with injustice in intimate relationships

In the presented sample, a repeated measures ANOVA determined that there was a statistically significant difference between the levels of the measured variable "coping with injustice" - $F(3.00; 347.96) = 188.24; p < .001$. Post hoc tests using Bonferroni correction revealed a significant difference between coping strategies, specifically: cooperation x assertivity (p < .001), cooperation x revenge (p < .001), cooperation x instrumental support (p < .001), cooperation x nonchalance (p < .001), assertivity x revenge (p < .001), assertivity x instrumental support (p < .001), assertivity x nonchalance (p < .001), revenge x instrumental support (p < .001), revenge x nonchalance (p < .001), instrumental support x nonchalance (p < .001). The assessment of coping strategies showed that most common strategy used in unjust situations was cooperation (M = 4.61; SD = .85) (Table 1).

Table 1 Descriptive analysis of coping strategies used in unjust situations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertivity</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonchalance</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental support</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>.86</td>
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</tbody>
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The belief in a just world and coping with injustice in intimate relationships

Based on the theoretical background and the aim of the present study, we focused additionally on analyzing the character of the relationship between the belief in a just world and particular coping strategies used in unjust situations. The Pearson correlation coefficient of the belief in a just world and coping strategies did not point to any statistically significant relationship. The results are shown in Table 2.
Belief in a Just World and Coping with Injustice in Intimate Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief in a just world</th>
<th>Coping strategies</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>p</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertivity</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental support</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonchalance</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>Cooperation</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertivity</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental support</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonchalance</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

Justice is an important part of intimate relationships because if a person treats their partner fairly, and shows respect and dignity, the partner feels happier and more satisfied with the relationship (Cramer, 2002). However, negative situations such as conflicts, lying and infidelity or a partner’s unfairness can affect the quality and future of the relationship. According to Feeney (1994) more important than the frequency and perceived significance of an unfair situation, is the way in which partners solve the problem and especially how they try to cope with it. Our research has shown that cooperation was the most commonly used coping strategy in dealing with injustice. Intimate relationships are interdependent and overlapping because one is identified with one’s own partner. According to Arona et al. (1991), individuals consider interaction with partner as a part of their own self. This mechanism increases the level of cooperation through coping with injustice. In other words, identification with partner, the "me and you" feeling supports the process of cooperation in coping with injustice. This phenomenon has been confirmed by other studies (e.g. Derlega et al., 2002; Karremans, van Lange, & Holland, 2005), which consistently claim that interdependence or synergy between partners is associated with the effort of using more constructive strategies and is associated with a higher willingness to forgive injustice.

The belief in a just world is a fundamental component of understanding the world and gives people the ability to orientate in it. As Dalbert (2009) argues, a personal belief in a just world is more important than a general belief in a just world, because of the sense of personal belief in a just world. The belief in a justice that determines the personal life of an individual is more important for mental health; the general belief in a just world plays only a mediating or marginal role (Dalajka & Širůček, 2010). This hypothesis has been confirmed in our research, as well. Respondents had a higher level of personal belief in a just world than general belief. A personal belief in a just world is shaped by one’s own experiences and it is an indicator of the personal relevance of justice in one’s own life (Dalbert, 1999).

Many authors stress the importance of distinguishing the personal and the general belief in a just world because individuals’ scores are systematically higher for the personal than for the
general belief in a just world (Dalbert, 1999; Lipkus et al., 1996; Wenzel, Schindler, & Reinhard, 2017). An adequate explanation could be found in the idea that the endorsement of the personal rather than the general belief in a just world is more fundamental for the individual’s well-being (Lipkus et al., 1996), interpersonal trust (Bègue & Bastounis, 2003) or pro-social behavior (Bègue, 2014).

The belief in a just world plays an important role in the process of coping with injustice. Several studies have highlighted the fact that individuals who believe in a just world cope effectively with stressful situations such as a partner’s unfairness (Dalbert, 1993; Lerner & Somers, 1992). The main aim of the contribution was to analyse the relationship between the belief in a just world and selected coping strategies used in unjust situations. The results showed there was no significant relationship between the belief in a just world and coping strategies. Our findings are inconsistent with Montada and Lerner study (1998), in which the belief in a just world was associated with constructive coping strategies. Moreover, Lipkus and Bissonnete (1998) argue that individuals with higher belief in a just world are more likely to perceive their partner as acting in a manner consistent with themes of deservingness, and therefore expect that their own accommodation will be reciprocated for the long-term well-being of the relationship.

The reason for inconsistent results can be found in the nature of the belief in a just world. According to Dalbert and Sallay (2004), individuals who have strong belief in a just world, have stronger belief in other people and also expect their acts will be rewarded fairly in the future. Individuals who perceive the world as a just place, value positive information about justice rather than negative information (Hagedoorn, Buunk, & van de Vilert, 2002) and tend to deny the harms committed against others in order to maintain their own well-being (Faccenda & Pantaléon, 2011). This strong belief in a just world is closely related to the use of the principle of deserving - everything that has happened is deserved, so the world can not be unjust (Faccenda & Pantaléon, 2011). Faccenda and Pantaléon (2011) add that strong belief in a just world can be considered as an ego-oriented, defensive mechanism. Thus, it is possible to assume that the belief in a just world is associated with cognitive responses to injustice (e.g. changing the context of injustice) rather than behavioral responses (e.g. revenge, cooperation, instrumental support) in coping with injustice in intimate relationships.

Dzuka and Dalbert (2000) point out that the belief in a just world could be a positive and healthy coping strategy in itself. The belief in a just world is a stabilizing force that helps one deals with daily hassles (Dalbert, 1998). The belief in a just world could be found as a major coping strategy (Fuhrman, 2003) or as a personal coping resource influencing the coping process in different ways and protect victims from ruminating (Dalbert, 1998).

Another explanation is the fact that this study was limited by sample size. Further, the results of this study were based on data collected from the respondents in early adulthood and cohabitating in short-term relationships. Specific stage of life and/or the character of the relationship might have influenced the results. Future studies should look into the phenomenon of “the belief in a just world and coping with injustice” paradox to understand the process of coping with a partner’s unfairness in the context of the belief in a just world among people in different stages of life, people who are married or those who have children.
Conclusion

This paper dealt with the concept of belief in a just world and coping with injustice in intimate relationships. The paper defined the character of the belief in a just world and clarified that personal BJW is more significant for individuals than general BJW. The paper also showed that cooperation was the most used coping strategy through dealing with injustice in intimate relationships.

When people are confronted with injustice in an intimate relationship, they can use a variety of strategies to help them cope with this unfair situation. How they can cope with an unfair situation depends on several variables. The aim of this contribution was to analyze the relationship between the belief in a just world and coping with injustice. However, this relationship was not confirmed by the presented research.

It is necessary to continue the research in this area; whether in terms of analysing the relationship between the belief in a just world and coping with injustice in intimate relationships and/or adding new dispositional and situational variables, which could relate to coping with injustice in intimate relationships - sensitivity to injustice (Gollwitzer et al., 2009; Thomas, Baumert, & Schmitt, 2012); moral justification (Čopková, 2017); dominance (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2000); emotions (Mikula, Scherer, & Athenstaedt, 1998), characteristics of intimate relationships (Kluwer & Johnson, 2007), etc. Thus, new findings would be able to enrich the research in the field of coping established in the context of justice in intimate relationships.
Belief in a Just World and Coping with Injustice in Intimate Relationships

References


