

AGGRESSION AT SCHOOL: BELIEF IN A PERSONAL JUST WORLD AND WELL-BEING OF VICTIMS AND AGGRESSORS^{*}

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Abstract: This paper presents a research study where just world research was applied to the analysis of aggression at school. Based on previous findings that characterize the belief in a just world (BJW) as a valuable resource for maintaining positive well-being and assimilating injustice, the present studies test the hypotheses that: 1) personal BJW is positively correlated with subjective well-being; 2) this relationship holds for victims and aggressors alike. Overall, findings were in line with our hypotheses. The stronger the adolescents' endorsements of the BJW, the better their well-being. The pattern of results persists when controlled for neuroticism and extraversion. The implications of these results for further studies on aggression, victimization, and well-being are discussed.

Key words: aggression, just world beliefs, adolescence, well-being, victimization

Aggression has been shown to have marked detrimental consequences for both victims and aggressors. Effects on victims include low self-esteem, depression, and school failure (for a review, see Parker, Ascher, 1987); implications for aggressors include delinquent behavior (Rigby, Cox, 1996) and low levels of happiness (Rigby, Slee, 1993). We classified the following five acts as aggression: verbal aggression, physical aggression, stealing, manipulation of belongings, and forcing the victim to engage in adverse behavior aimed at his or her social isolation. We defined victims of aggression as students who had experienced at least one of these acts recently,

and perpetrators of aggression as students who had performed one of these acts recently. We do not consider repetition to be a necessary condition for aggression (O'Moore, McGuire, 2001), because even a single threat can cause emotional damage and concern about the future.

The belief that events in one's life are just, as reflected in the personal belief in a just world (BJW), seems to be of particular relevance to emotional development at school. It serves as a resource that bolsters subjective well-being in general (Dalbert, 2001), and in adolescents (e.g., Dzuka, Dalbert, 2002) and at school in particular (e.g., Dalbert, Stoeber, 2005). Against this background, the study presented in this paper tests the association between personal BJW and well-being in the context of aggression. More specifically, we examine whether this association holds for victims

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and aggressors, and whether strength of BJW is associated with victim and aggressor status.

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, p. 14). Three functions of this BJW have been identified (Dalbert, 2001). The first is to compel individuals to behave justly, for example, high believers in a just world will be motivated to achieve their personal goals by just means (e.g., Hafer, 2000). By acting justly, they respect the terms of their personal contract (Lerner, 1980), which gives them the prospect of being justly rewarded. Consequently, as its second function, BJW endows people with trust in others and in the justice of their fate. This trust has several adaptive consequences - it gives individuals the confidence to invest in long-term goals (e.g., Dalbert, Sallay, 2004; Otto, Dalbert, 2005), to trust others to treat them fairly, and to be rewarded justly. As a third function, BJW provides a framework that helps individuals to interpret the events of their life in a meaningful way (e.g., Hafer, Correy, 1999), thus protecting the BJW, by restoring justice either psychologically (e.g., minimizing the injustice) or behaviorally (e.g., compensating the injustice). These three functions of the BJW can be assumed to mediate the positive relationship between BJW and well-being in the victims of aggression at school and its perpetrators.

Aggression is clearly a threatening and unjust situation that may lead to decreases in the well-being and mental health of its victims. Based on the third function of BJW, we argue that BJW can be expected to buffer the well-being of aggression victims because strong believers are better

able to cope with such unjust experiences. When individuals high in BJW are confronted with injustice, they try to compensate or justify it; for example, by blaming themselves or by playing down the unfairness (Bulman, Wortman, 1977). Consequently, BJW is seen as a buffer helping victims of injustice to cope with their experiences. Accordingly, we expect aggression victims high in BJW to report more positive affect and higher life satisfaction than victims low in BJW.

Because just behavior is mandatory for students high in BJW, aggression may also threaten the aggressor's BJW. This threat can, however, be diminished by finding justifications for the unjust behavior. Aggressors can either reason that they are "better" than the other students and are therefore authorized to impose the appropriate behavior on their fellow students (Kolář, 2001), or they may justify aggression by blaming the victim, reasoning that he or she deserved to be punished or provoked the aggressor in the first place (e.g., Říčan, 1995). Hence, a strong personal BJW is also expected to be positively associated with the well-being of aggressors.

Recent investigations have shown that it is necessary to distinguish the belief in a personal just world from the belief in a general just world (Dalbert, 1999; Lipkus, Dalbert, Siegler, 1996). The personal BJW reflects the belief that, overall, events in one's life are just, whereas the general BJW reflects the belief that, basically, the world is a just place. It has been shown that individuals tend to endorse the belief in a personal just world more strongly than the belief in a general just world and that the personal BJW is a better predictor of well-being than the general BJW (e.g., Dzuka, Dalbert, 2002; Lipkus et al., 1996). We therefore focus on personal BJW in the present study.

Research into the relationship between broad personality dimensions and well-being has revealed that extraversion correlates positively with the frequency of positive affect, and neuroticism with the frequency of negative affect (Costa, McCrae, 1980). Additionally, there is some evidence to suggest that personal BJW as a personality trait correlates positively with extraversion (e.g., Lipkus et al., 1996) and, in particular, negatively with neuroticism (e.g., Dzuka, Dalbert, 2002). Thus, a significant association between personal BJW and well-being might be attributable to the fact that both constructs are related to global personality dimensions, namely neuroticism and extraversion. To test this possibility, neuroticism and extraversion were assessed as control variables.

In sum, this study tested the following hypotheses: a) The more strongly students endorse the personal BJW, the less likely they are to report negative affect, and the more likely they are to report positive affect and high life satisfaction; b) These associations hold for both victims and aggressors; c) These associations hold when controlled for the global personality dimensions of extraversion and neuroticism.

METHOD

Procedure and Sample

The study was conducted in Slovakian vocational schools, which are mainly attended by male students preparing for blue-collar jobs. Vocational training lasts three years and culminates in an exam. The assessment was conducted in the classroom during lesson time. Participants were guaranteed anonymity.

Participants were 195 male students aged between 15 and 19 years ($M = 16.6$; $SD =$

0.86). Based on their self-reports, 61 students (31% of the sample) were identified as victims of aggression, having experienced at least one act of aggression recently, and 49 students (25%) were identified as aggressors, having performed at least one act of aggression recently. The analyses that follow are based on these two groups. Additionally, 59 students reported no experience of aggression, and 26 reported being both victims and perpetrators of aggression. These 85 students were excluded from the following analyses.

Measures

BJW. BJW was measured using the Personal Belief in a Just World Scale (Dalbert, 1999). The scale comprises 7 items designed to capture the belief that, overall, events in one's life are just ($\alpha = .77$; sample items: "I am usually treated fairly," "Overall, events in my life are just") with a 6-point answer scale ranging from 1 ("totally disagree") to 6 ("totally agree").

Global personality dimensions. To assess extraversion and neuroticism, we selected the 7 items with the highest item-total correlations from the Extraversion and Neuroticism scales of the NEO-FFI (Costa, McCrae, 1992; Czech version: Hřebíčková, 1997; extraversion: $\alpha = .72$; sample item: "I like to have a lot of people around me"; neuroticism: $\alpha = .70$; sample item: "I often feel inferior to others"). The 5-point answer scales ranged from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

Well-Being. Life satisfaction was assessed using the 5-item General Life Satisfaction Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, Griffin, 1985; $\alpha = .68$) with a 7-point answer scale ranging from 1 ("totally disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree") (sample item: "I am satisfied with my life"). The emotional component of well-being

was assessed using the Affectometer 2 (Kammann, Flett, 1983), which consists of two scales - Frequency of Positive Affect (24 items; sample item: "joy"; $\alpha = .91$); Frequency of Negative Affect (24 items; sample item: "anxiety"; $\alpha = .91$) tapping the emotions experienced over the past weeks with 5-point answer scales ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("always"). Scale scores were computed by averaging across items, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of the construct.

Status. Each participant was asked two questions: first, whether they had experienced any of the five acts of aggression recently (verbal aggression, physical aggression, stealing, manipulation of belongings, and forcing the victim to engage in adverse behavior aimed at his or her social

isolation) and, second, whether they had performed any of these acts recently. Students chose between the response alternatives "not at all," "once or twice," "several times," and "frequently." Those who endorsed at least one of the acts were categorized as victims or aggressors.

RESULTS

Firstly, to inspect mean differences between the two groups, a MANOVA was conducted on all measures, comparing the 61 victims of aggression with the 49 aggressors. Wilk's lambda did not identify any substantial differences between the groups ($F_{7/102} = 0.63$; $p = .73$). Secondly, zero-order correlations between the key variables were inspected (see Table 1).

Table 1. Correlations and descriptive statistics for victims and aggressors

Scale	M	SD	Positive affect	Negative affect	Personal BJW	Extra-version	Neuroticism
<i>Victims (n = 61)</i>							
Life satisfaction	4.12	1.27	.45**	-.25*	.49**	.11	-.07
Positive affect	3.01	0.67		-.15	.23	.40**	-.15
Negative affect	2.39	0.71			-.21	-.04	.40**
Personal BJW	4.10	0.68				-.01	-.23
Extraversion	3.80	0.56					-.03
Neuroticism	3.07	0.61					
<i>Aggressors (n = 49)</i>							
Life satisfaction	4.26	1.01	.19	-.18	.34*	-.05	-.11
Positive affect	3.17	0.53		-.08	.20	.41**	-.04
Negative affect	2.17	0.47			-.42**	.22	.57**
Personal BJW	4.12	0.88				.01	-.11
Extraversion	3.80	0.57					.36**
Neuroticism	2.94	0.62					

Note: Ratings of life satisfaction range from 1 to 7; of positive and negative affect, extraversion, and neuroticism from 1 to 5; of personal BJW from 1 to 6. In all cases, a higher value indicates stronger endorsement of the construct

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Results show that personal BJW displayed significant correlations in the expected direction with both dimensions of well-being. The more strongly students endorsed the personal BJW, the more satisfied they were with life (significant in both groups), and the less negative affect they experienced (significant in the aggressors group). The negative correlation between BJW and negative affect was particularly strong in aggressors. Extraversion correlated with positive affect, and neuroticism with negative affect, in the expected direction in both groups, but the two global personality dimensions did not correlate with BJW.

To clarify the relationship between well-being and BJW, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed for life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative

affect, respectively. Following Aiken and West (1991) we centered the BJW before analyzing the data. We first tested the interaction: Status and personal BJW (centered) were entered in the first block, and the product term depicting the interaction of personal BJW (centered) with status was entered stepwise in the final block. If the interaction became significant, it was tested with personality included. Thus, status was entered stepwise in the first block; the two personality variables were entered stepwise in the second block; personal BJW (centered) was entered in the third block; to conclude, the product terms depicting the interaction of personal BJW (centered) with status was entered in the final block. The accepted models ($p < .05$) are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Regression of well-being on status, global personality, personal bjw (centered), and the interaction of bjw with status (accepted models; $p < .05$)

Predictors	R ² -change	B	β	t	p
Life satisfaction ($F_{\text{total}}(3,106) = 8.669$; $p < .001$)					
Status	.00	0.14			
Personal BJW	.16***	0.92			
Personal BJW X status	.03*	-0.53		-1.981	.05
(Constant)		4.12			
Positive affect ($F_{\text{total}}(2,107) = 13.811$; $p < .001$)					
Extraversion	.16***	0.44	.40	4.676	< .001
Personal BJW	.04*	0.16	.21	2.402	.02
(Constant)		1.46			
Negative affect ($F_{\text{total}}(2,107) = 18.174$; $p < .001$)					
Neuroticism	.21***	0.43	.43	5.013	< .001
Personal BJW	.04*	-0.17	-.21	-2.467	.02
(Constant)		1.00			

Note. Status: 0 = victim, 1 = aggressor

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Overall, 19 percent of the variance in life satisfaction was predicted by the main effect of personal BJW and its interaction with status. The more strongly the students endorsed the personal BJW, the more satisfied they were with life. This association was much stronger for victims ($b = .92$) than for aggressors ($b = .39$). Twenty percent of the variance in positive affect was predicted by extraversion and personal BJW. The interaction of personal BJW and status was not significant ($p = .49$). The more extraverted the students were and the stronger their belief in a personal just world, the more often they experienced positive affect. Finally, the main effects of neuroticism and personal BJW explained 25 percent of the variance in negative affect. The interaction of personal BJW and status was not significant ($p = .97$). The more neurotic the students were and the weaker their personal BJW, the more often they experienced negative affect.

DISCUSSION

In sum, results were in line with expectations. Personal BJW was associated with higher life satisfaction, more positive affect, and less negative affect, and these relationships persisted when controlled for global personality dimensions and, particularly, victim or aggressor status. Only the association between personal BJW and life satisfaction differed in the two groups, with BJW proving to be a better buffer for victims than for aggressors. Finally, the groups did not differ in terms of their global personality dimensions, their well-being, or their personal BJW.

Findings provided unambiguous support for the adaptive relationship hypothesized between personal BJW and dimensions of subjective well-being. The more strongly the students believed in a personal just

world, the more satisfied they were with life, the less negative affect and the more positive affect they experienced. Furthermore, these associations held for victims and aggressors alike. A differential pattern was only observed for life satisfaction, where personal BJW and life satisfaction were more strongly related in victims than in aggressors. Finally, the association between BJW and well-being persisted when other personality dimensions were controlled (extraversion, neuroticism).

One shortcoming of our research is, however, the cross-sectional nature of our study, meaning that causal conclusions cannot be drawn for at least two reasons. We interpret BJW as a relatively stable personal disposition which influences subjective well-being, but not the other way round. There is some evidence supporting this notion (Dalbert, 2002; Dalbert, Stoeber, 2006). We cannot rule out, however, the possibility that our participants reported on more BJW the better their well-being was. Furthermore, other variables, such as social desirability, may also have contributed to the associations between BJW and well-being. We at least controlled for neuroticism and extraversion to exclude this alternative interpretation for two well-known correlates of BJW and well-being. Longitudinal studies which take into account additional alternative explanations are needed for further corroboration of our findings.

Taken collectively, our data support the notion that the personal BJW acts as a buffer protecting well-being in various situations. In all of our students, whether they were aggressors or victims, a strong just world belief was associated with positive well-being. This pattern of results is in line with the reasoning that BJW can trigger different coping patterns in different situations, but that all of these coping

mechanisms seem to mediate the adaptive relationship between BJW and well-being. Victims may blame themselves. Aggressors may justify their behavior. The results seem to be the same across all groups: the stronger their BJW, the better their well-being. Future studies should examine the coping patterns mediating this relationship in more detail and should seek to elucidate the cognitions that are evoked in students high in personal BJW when inflicting aggression on others, or experiencing aggression themselves.

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AGRESIA V ŠKOLE:
VIERA V SPRAVODLIVÝ SVET
A SUBJEKTÍVNA POHODA OBETÍ A AGRESOROV

J. D z u k a, C. D a l b e r t

Súhrn: V štúdií je prezentovaný výskum, v ktorom bol overovaný vzťah viery v spravodlivý svet k agresii v škole. Na základe doterajších výskumných zistení, ktoré charakterizujú vieru v spravodlivý svet (VSS) ako cenný zdroj udržiavajúci pozitívnu subjektívnu pohodu a ktorý asimiluje nespravodlivosť, prezentovaný výskum testuje hypotézy, že: 1) osobná viera v spravodlivý svet pozitívne koreluje so subjektívnou pohodou a že 2) tento vzťah platí rovnako pre obeť ako aj pre agresorov. Celkovo možno konštatovať, že zistenia sú v súlade s hypotézami. Čím silnejšia bola viera v spravodlivý svet adolescentov, tým priaznivejšie boli hodnoty ich subjektívnej pohody. Toto zistenie platilo aj vtedy, ak bol kontrolovaný efekt neurotizmu a extravenzie. Implikácie týchto výsledkov sú diskutované z aspektu ďalšieho výskumu agresie, ohrozovania a subjektívnej pohody.