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*Belief in a Just World, Life Satisfaction
and Depression in Adults*

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Introduction

- ◆ According to the justice motive theory (Lerner, 1980), people are motivated to believe that they live in a just world in which everybody gets what he or she deserves and in which everybody deserves what he or she gets.

This belief in a just world (BJW) reflects, in fact, a schema of an ordered and meaningful world, which contributes to the individual's sense of security, control, and invulnerability and, thus, allows effective daily functioning (Cubela Adoric, 2004). Indeed, a number of studies have found positive relationship between the BJW and various dimensions of adjustment, such as life satisfaction, sense of coherence, trust in people, and optimism, as well as the negative relationship with depression, cynicism, and pessimism (cf. Cubela Adoric & Kvartuc, 2007; Dalbert, 2001).

In particular, such adaptive pattern was observed primarily for the personal BJW (i.e., the belief in a personal just world, where events in one's own life tend to be just). In addition, this BJW dimension has been almost consistently found to be more strongly endorsed than the general BJW, which refers to the belief in a general just world, in which everybody is treated justly (cf. Cubela Adoric & Kvartuc, 2007; Dalbert, 2001).

- ◆ This study aimed at providing further empirical evidence of the adaptive functioning of the BJW by exploring its relationships with life satisfaction and depression in a sample from adult population.

Based on previous studies, which mostly used student samples, positive relationship with life satisfaction and negative relationship with depression were expected, in particular for the personal BJW.

To provide further empirical evidence of the BJW's relationship with the sociodemographic characteristics, we also examined the general and personal BJWs across the various groups of participants with regard to age, gender, and education.

Method

- ◆ Participants:

The study was conducted in an age heterogeneous group of Croatian adults (N=196). The age ranged from 18-60 (M=37,4; SD=9,235).

- Instruments:

General Belief in a Just World Scale (Dalbert, Montada, & Schmitt, 1987; Croatian version adapted by Cubela, 2002) - a six-item instrument designed to assess the belief that the world is generally just (e.g., I think basically the world is a just place). Each item is rated on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Scale scores were computed by averaging the ratings on the individual items. Thus, the score range is from 1 to 6.

Personal Belief in a Just World Scale (Dalbert, 1999; Croatian version adapted by Cubela, 2002) – a seven-item instrument designed to assess the belief in a personal just world, where events in one's own life tend to be just (e.g., I believe that I usually get what I deserve). Each item is rated on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). A participant's total score was computed by averaging the ratings on the individual items; hence, the scores can range from 1 to 6.

The Croatian versions of both BJW scales have been implemented successfully in previous studies with participants from student and adult populations (cf. Cubela, 2002; Cubela Adoric, 2004; Cubela Adoric & Kwartuc, 2007).

- ❖ Depression was assessed with Depression Scale D-92 (Krizmanic & Kolesaric, 1994), which consists of 22 items containing a description of a symptom, affect or thought characteristic of depression. Respondents are asked to report whether he or she has experienced a particular symptom during the past 12 months by checking one of the four response categories that reflect the gradations of severity for each particular symptom. The responses are scored from absent (1) to severe (4). Sample item: "Do you feel that lately you have been overcome with sadness and sorrow instead of with joy and cheerfulness? – I am happy and cheerful all the time (1)... I am sad and cheerless all the time (4)". The item ratings were summed up to form a scale score which can range from 22-88.
- ◆ Life satisfaction was assessed using the Croatian version of the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985). The scale consists of five items (e.g., In most ways my life is close to my ideal). In this study, the respondents provided their responses on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The item ratings were summed up to form a scale score which ranged from 5 to 25.

Results

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and reliability of the measures of general and personal BJWs, life satisfaction, and depression

Scale	M	SD	range	α
General Belief in a Just World	3,7	,783	1,3 – 6,0	,64
Personal Belief in a Just World	4,0	,805	1,9 – 5,9	,77
Life Satisfaction	15,4	4,672	5 - 25	,84
Depression	44.7	7,146	31 - 71	,87

Table 2. Correlations and partial correlations of life satisfaction and depression with the general and personal BJWs

	GENERAL BJW		PERSONAL BJW	
	r	r _{12.3}	r	r _{12.3}
1. Life satisfaction	,46**	,25**	,49**	,30**
2. Depression	-,33**	-,05	-,50**	-,39**

** - $p < .01$

Endorsement of general and personal BJW

- ◆ Descriptive statistics of the two BJW measures are depicted in Table 1.
- ◆ As can be seen, a large variability of the individual scores was observed. As indicated by the mean values, the participants endorsed the personal BJW more strongly than the general BJW. This is supported by the result of the t-test for dependent samples ($t=4.58$, $p<.01$).
- ◆ The correlation between the two BJWs was significant but only moderately high ($r=.59$, $p<.01$). Given that the two BJWs represent different aspects of the same basic belief, the size of their association in this study provides further support for the validity of the two BJW scales.
- ◆ Both findings are in line with previous studies results (cf. Cubela, 2002; Cubela Adoric & Kvartuc, 2007; Dalbert, 2001).

BJW, life satisfaction and depression

- ◆ The correlations between the measures of the two BJWs with the measures of life satisfaction and depression are presented in Table 2.
- ◆ As predicted, both just-world beliefs were found to correlate positively with life satisfaction and negatively with depression.
- ◆ As indicated by the partial correlations, these “adaptive” relationships hold primarily for the personal BJW. In fact, the personal BJW seems to explain a large part of the general BJW’s association with life satisfaction and depression.
- ◆ These results are also in line with previous research findings indicating that the more one believes in the justness of the world (especially in the personal domain), the more satisfied he or she is and the less he or she feels depressed. (cf. Cubela Adoric & Kvartuc, 2007; Dalbert, 2001).

BJW and sociodemographic characteristics

- ◆ **Age:** Neither general or personal BJW were found to correlate with the participants age (both $p > .05$).
- ◆ **Gender:** There was no significant difference in the endorsement of either BJW between male and female participants (both $p > .05$).
- ◆ **Education:** There was no significant difference between the groups of participants with different education level in the endorsement of the general BJW. For personal BJW a significant effect of education level was observed ($F = 9.35$, $p < .05$), and the post-hoc analysis showed that this BJW was more strongly endorsed by the group with highest education compared to the groups with lower education.
- ◆ **Interactions:** Two significant interaction effects were found for the personal BJW:
 - (1) Education X Gender ($F = 3.37$, $p < .05$), indicating that the general tendency of stronger personal BJW in participants with highest education is primarily pronounced in male participants;
 - (2) Age X Gender ($F = 2.84$, $p < .05$), indicating that the personal BJW is less strongly endorsed by the oldest group of male participants (51-60 years) as compared to oldest group of female participants or younger groups of male participants (all $p < .05$).

Conclusions

- ◆ Supplementing previous research into adaptive functioning of the belief in the justness of the world, this study examined the relationships between the general and personal BJW and two indicators of adjustment (life satisfaction and depression) in an age heterogeneous sample of Croatian adults.
- ◆ In line with the findings of the previous studies that mostly used younger samples, this study results suggest that during adulthood the belief in the justness of the world (especially in the personal domain) is also associated with better adjustment (i.e., higher life satisfaction and lower depression).
- ◆ The endorsement of the general BJW was found to be relatively stable across the groups of adult participants with regard to age, gender, and education. Higher education was found to be related with a stronger personal BJW, especially in male participants. However, it seems that in men this BJW aspect decreases with age, which points to the perceived (loss of) privileges associated with adulthood transitions (in this case: those associated with the anticipation of retirement) as an avenue that future studies might find fruitful.

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