Editorial: Dealing with Strain at the Workplace: A Just World Perspective

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Editorial: Dealing with Strain at the Workplace: A Just World Perspective

Just world research has investigated how the belief in a just world (BJW) relates to well-being and coping (for reviews, see Dalbert, 2001; Furnham 2003), but has not yet examined its relations to strain at the workplace. At the same time, numerous studies in the field of organizational psychology have shown justice to be a key issue in working life (for a review, see Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005). This Special Section aims to bring together these two independent lines of research.

The experience of justice at the workplace has various adaptive consequences. Employees want to be paid, mentored, promoted, and even laid off in accordance with certain justice-driven rules. Employees who feel treated fairly at the workplace are more satisfied with their job and feel more committed to their organization (for a review, see Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). However, research has not yet provided answers to the question of why justice is so important. One possible answer is that people need to believe in a just world because it enables them to cope successfully with the demands of their job and with strain at the workplace. From this perspective, justice at the workplace is important because it reinforces the belief in a just world.

Just world research has evidenced three functions of the belief in a just world (for a review, see Dalbert, 2001): (a) it enables people to trust in being treated fairly by others, (b) it promotes the assimilation of injustices, and (c) it obliges people to act fairly themselves. Thus, the belief in a just world serves important adaptive functions, such as enabling people to invest in long-term goals and assuaging people’s concerns about the unfairness of others. In consequence, the belief in a just world supports mental health and well-being. A relationship between the belief in a just world and psychological adjustment has been found in groups as diverse as adolescents and the elderly (e.g., Maes & Schmitt, 2004), unemployed factory workers (e.g., Lerner & Somers, 1992), and flood victims (Otto, Boos, Dalbert, Schöps, & Hoyer, 2006). As yet, however, very little is known about how the belief in a just world
Strain at the workplace affects coping and well-being in the complex world of work. The three papers in this Special Section are among the first to address the impact of the belief in a just world on coping with strain at the workplace.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of differentiating between a general and a more personal BJW (Dalbert, 1999; Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996). The personal BJW reflects the belief that events in one’s own life are just; the general BJW reflects the belief that, basically, the world is a just place. Research has shown that individuals tend to endorse the personal BJW more strongly than the general BJW and that the personal BJW is more important in predicting mental health (e.g., Sutton & Douglas, 2005). Because all three studies in this Special Section investigate the personal BJW (although Cubela Adoric and Kvartuc, 2007, in this issue, additionally explore other justice beliefs), this discussion focuses on the meaning of the personal just world.

The paper by Dzuka and Dalbert (2007, in this issue) addresses a specific kind of strain at the workplace, namely student violence against teachers, and tests the hypotheses that personal BJW is adaptively associated with teacher well-being and serves as buffer for the victims of violence in particular. The results support the just world perspective. Violence experiences were found to have a detrimental effect on well-being, and personal BJW to have an adaptive association with well-being in terms of life satisfaction and positive and negative mood. Furthermore, an interaction effect of personal BJW and violence experiences was found for negative affect. It was only among teachers with a weak belief in a personal just world that violence experiences were associated with more negative affect; among those with a strong personal BJW, violence experiences did not explain negative affect. These adaptive associations of the personal BJW were observed although the personal BJW was lower the more violence was experienced.

Cubela Adoric and Kvartuc (2007, in this issue) investigated the effects of mobbing, or workplace harassment, on psychological adjustment. In particular, they compared a group
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of mobbing victims with a matched control group with respect to various justice beliefs, including the belief in a personal just world, and five dimensions of psychological adjustment, namely depression, optimism, pessimism, trust, and cynicism. The study revealed that, relative to the matched control group, mobbing victims had weaker beliefs in a personal just world and were more depressed and pessimistic and less trustful. Furthermore, personal belief in a just world was most consistently associated with adjustment. The more the employees endorsed the personal BJW, the less depressed and pessimistic they were, and the more optimistic and trustful. None of the adjustment dimensions were explained further by the interaction of personal BJW and mobbing, however.

Whereas Dzuka and Dalbert as well Cubela Adoric and Kvartuc focus on more general dimensions of adjustment, Otto and Schmidt (2007, in this issue) extend the perspective to include work-related cognitions and behaviors, as well as the adjustment dimensions of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. In an online questionnaire study with employees of various organizations, they investigated the work-related cognitions of affective commitment versus the intention to quit and self-rated performance and “sick presence” (i.e., attending work before making a full recovery from sickness) as proxy indicators of work-related behavior. Moreover, they controlled for well-known work stressors, such as job content, employment conditions, and mobbing experiences, as well as for work-related resources other than personal BJW. The more the employees rated their work to be monotonous and the more mobbing they experienced at the workplace, the less they endorsed the personal BJW. Nevertheless, personal BJW was adaptively associated with all six outcome dimensions, even when work stressors and other work-related resources were controlled. In fact, personal BJW was the only predictor that made a significant contribution to explaining all outcome dimensions. The more the employees endorsed the belief in personal BJW, the more committed they felt to their organization, the lower their intention to
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quit, the better their self-rated performance, the less likely they were to work when sick, and the lower their emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

What do we learn from these papers for the research agenda of organizational psychology? Certainly this is the place where the peer commentary by Bobocel and Hafer (2007, this issue) is important to read, and as editors I will not try to topple this. In my view, the patterns of results of all three studies point in the same direction. The findings unambiguously support the notion that the personal BJW promotes psychological adjustment and the subjective quality of the working life. All participants in the studies -- whether they were teachers from Slovakia exposed to student violence or employees from Croatia or eastern Germany exposed to mobbing or other work stressors -- showed more adaptive outcomes the higher their personal BJW. These results are in line with just world reasoning. Employees need to believe that events in their life are generally just. This belief enables them to trust in the fairness of others, and thus in being allocated fair tasks that are within their capabilities at work. As a consequence, a strong personal BJW enables them to perform better and reduces the likelihood of sick presence. Because the BJW serves such adaptive functions, employees are motivated to defend it, assimilating personal experiences of injustice to their BJW and, for example, feeling more committed to their organization. Justice experiences in the working context therefore reinforce employees’ belief in a personal just world, enabling them to trust in the justice of their colleagues and supervisors, as well as in their own abilities to cope with the demands of work. These experiences and beliefs thus enhance the subjective quality of the working world.

The personal BJW is usually seen as a personal disposition and thus as a relatively stable personal resource. The studies reported in this Special Section qualify this hypothesis. Otto and Schmidt (2007, in this volume) report cross-sectional associations that might be interpreted in two ways: as indicating either that strong just world believers assimilate experiences to their BJW and thus report fewer mobbing experiences and less monotony at
work, or that monotony at work and mobbing experiences decrease the personal BJW. Based on the results of the other two studies, it seems to be more reasonable to interpret BJW as being partly experiential. Victims of mobbing (Cubela Adoric & Kvartuc, 2007, in this volume) and of student violence (Dzuka & Dalbert, in this volume) had lower personal BJW scores than their nonvictim counterparts. Cubela Adoric and Kvartuc argue that injustice experiences only impact on the BJW when these experiences reach a specific degree of adversity. Further studies are needed to investigate under which conditions BJW fosters the assimilation of injustice at work and under which conditions injustice at work can no longer be justified, but instead undermines BJW.

There is a difference between a personal resource and a buffer. A personal resource can be defined as a personal disposition that helps people to cope with the events of their life, including working life. The stronger the resource, the better they can be expected to cope. In other words, a personal resource implies a main effect hypothesis. A personal buffer, in contrast, is usually seen as a resource that takes effect under specific adverse conditions. A buffer thus implies a moderator hypothesis; the buffer should moderate the association between strain and outcome. Two of the three papers in this Special Section investigate the hypothesis that the personal BJW functions as a buffer for the work stress caused by mobbing and student violence. Overall, the results do not support the buffer hypothesis. Note, however, that personal BJW was at least as important for the victims as for the nonvictims in all tests. This finding is very much in line with the resource hypothesis. The personal BJW should thus be seen more as personal resource helping all employees to cope with the demands of work than as a buffer serving to protect victims of major stressors, in particular.
References


motive in adolescence and young adulthood: Origins and consequences (pp. 64-82).


Acknowledgment

This Special Section is dedicated to Hedvig Sallay who passed away in June 2007. Hedvig Sallay (University of Debrecen, Hungary) was a constant supporter of just world research in Europe and had intended to contribute an exciting chapter to this Special Section on how the belief in a just world and trust in justice at the workplace have developed over the last decade in Hungary.