Belief in a just world and its functions for young prisoners

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Abstract

This study focuses on the relationship between belief in a just world (BJW) and the feelings and behavior of young prisoners, taking into account their familial background and criminal career. Our sample comprised 66 young male prisoners from a German detention center. Regression analysis provided evidence for the three functions of the BJW. (a) High believers showed more justice motive-congruent behavior, e.g., they revealed fewer disciplinary problems during imprisonment. (b) High believers interpreted events in their life as more just, e.g., they perceived their legal proceedings as more just; consequently, they reported more feelings of guilt, and they were better able to cope with their anger. (c) High believers revealed more trust in their future, e.g., they were more confident that they would be able to achieve their personal goals. Overall, the BJW seems to be an important resource capable of improving young prisoners’ rehabilitation prospects.

Key words: just world belief, young prisoners, rehabilitation, development in adolescence
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Numerous psychological investigations have attempted to explain juvenile delinquency and ways of rehabilitating young offenders with reference to various personality variables such as intellectual capacity, moral reasoning, maturity, and self-concept, as well as to previous deviant behavior, including aggressive, antisocial, or suicidal behavior in childhood (e.g., Aleixo & Norris, 2000; Greve & Enzmann, 2003; Grosz et al., 1994; Levy, 1997; Richter, Scheurer, Kröber, & Saß, 1993; Viemerö, 1996; for a review, see Binder, 1988; Gulotta, 1999; Hawkins, 1996). The significance of justice-based beliefs, however, has long been neglected. Because of the lack of research the present study examines the influence of justice beliefs on the experience of young prisoners during incarceration and on their prospects of rehabilitation.

Lerner (1965) developed the just world hypothesis which states that people are motivated to believe that the world is basically a just place where people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. The belief in a just world (BJW) is thought to serve different adaptive functions, and people try to protect this belief when they are confronted with injustice. Several experimental and correlational studies have provided evidence to support these assumptions, both when individuals suffer unfairness (Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Comer & Laird, 1975), and when they observe unfairness done to others (for a review, see Furnham & Procter, 1989; Lerner & Miller, 1978).

Despite its adaptive significance, past research has focused on the anti-social properties of BJW, with studies showing a positive relationship between BJW and severe disadvantage or a serious mischief (e.g., by derogating the victim). However, in the last decade, more studies have investigated the positive as well as the negative social consequences of BJW. Thereby, the BJW's consequences for the believers themselves also came into focus. Overall, just world research has identified at least three functions of the BJW (Dalbert, 2001): (a) It is indicative of a personal contract and the obligation to behave fairly,
(b) it endows individuals with the confidence that they will be treated fairly by others and will not fall victim to an unforeseeable disaster, and (c) it provides a conceptual framework which helps individuals to interpret the events of their personal life in a meaningful way. We assume that these three functions of the BJW can help to gain a deeper understanding of the feelings and behavior of young prisoners. Moreover, we assume that the BJW can be seen as an adaptive resource that fosters the adolescents’ development after their release from prison.

Note that we do not expect that a high BJW could prevent committing crimes during adolescence per se. Adolescence is the period in life of heightened "storm and stress" resulting in conflicts with parents, mood disruptions as well as reckless, norm-breaking and antisocial risk behavior (e.g., Arnett, 1999). Especially young men are in danger of committing crimes (Moffitt, 1993) due to several reasons like testing a possible identity or depending on peer influences (e.g., Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Vitaro, Tremblay, Kerr, Pagani, & Bukowski, 1997) which are unlikely to be neutralized by the BJW. However, the strength of the belief in a just world is expected to influence later criminal behavior, in that young prisoners with a strong personal BJW should feel and behave in ways that ease the rehabilitation process. Within young male delinquents, two groups can be differentiated, the "adolescence-limited" and the "life-course-persistent" offenders (Moffitt, 1993). It would be helpful to learn more about the psychological conditions which can predict whether a delinquent adolescent becomes a life-course-persistent offender or stops criminal behavior after adolescence (Greve, 2001). We would like to argue that the BJW can be one of the critical conditions determining whether or not adolescent criminality develops into a life-long criminal career.

In a just world, a positive future is not the gift of a benevolent world, but a reward for the individual’s behavior and character. Consequently, the more individuals believe in a just world, the more compelled they feel to strive for justice themselves. Thus, BJW is indicative of a personal contract (Lerner, 1977), the terms of which oblige the individual to behave
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fairly. For example, high just world believers are more likely to help people in need (Bierhoff, Klein, & Kramp, 1991; DePalma, Madey, Tillman, & Wheeler, 1999). BJW has been shown to be one of the important correlates of social responsibility as a trait (Bierhoff, 1994), and to be significantly related to the commitment to just means (Hafer, 2000). Furthermore, motive-incongruent behavior is censured by, for example, a decrease in self-esteem (Dalbert, 1999). The commitment to the personal contract should also exert an influence on prisoners. Because the BJW motivates individuals to behave fairly, prisoners with strong beliefs in a just world should be more likely to conform to the demands of the penal system and can be expected to experience fewer disciplinary problems during their term of imprisonment at least to the extent that they perceive their incarceration as just.

Moreover, individuals high in BJW are able to trust in the fairness of others (Furnham, 1995; Zuckerman & Gerbasi, 1977). As a result, people high in BJW are more likely to invest in their future because they are confident that their investments will be fairly rewarded. This includes goal-directed behavior such as investment in long-term goals (Dette, Stöber, & Dalbert, 2004; Hafer, 2000). Therefore, it is hypothesized that strong believers in a just world will be more confident of achieving their personal goals after release from prison than weak believers.

Because BJW serves important adaptive purposes, individuals are motivated to defend this belief in the face of threat (e.g. Lerner & Miller, 1978; Dalbert, 2001). Being confronted with an injustice, either observed or experienced, threatens the belief that justice prevails in the world, thus leading high BJW individuals to attempt to restore justice either literally or figuratively. When they experience unfairness they do not believe can be resolved in reality, they try to assimilate this experience to their BJW. This can be done by justifying the experienced unfairness as being at least partly self-inflicted (Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Comer & Laird, 1975; Lupfer, Doan, & Houston, 1998), by playing down the unfairness (Dalbert, 1996; Lipkus & Siegler, 1993), and by avoiding self-focused rumination (Dalbert,
These considerations suggest that strong just world believers are likely to perceive their legal proceedings as just and to experience more guilt than low BJW prisoners. Taken collectively, perceiving the legal proceedings as just may be the decisive factor allowing prisoners to accept their sentence and develop an intrinsic motivation to obey the law in the future (Haller, Machura, & Bierhoff, 1995; Tyler, 1984). The prisoner’s belief in a personal just world may be an essential condition for the development of such an intrinsic motivation.

Furthermore, anger is most typically accompanied by the experience of unfairness (e.g., Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Individuals high in BJW are more likely to assimilate injustice to their BJW by several coping mechanisms outlined above. Accordingly, individuals high in BJW not only experience anger less often (Dalbert, 2002), but also are less likely to express their anger with overt verbal (e.g., insults, sarcasm) or physical behavior (e.g., slamming doors, throwing objects; Spielberger, 1988). In sum, we would expect the young prisoners high in BJW to be less likely to show their anger in outburst behavior. Thus, the prisoners’ BJW may be a resource helping them to stay away from antisocial behavior.

In sum, the present study is the first to test possible connections between the belief in a just world and various aspects of youth criminality. (1) We expected that, compared to weak just world believers, strong just world believers would perceive (1a) their legal proceedings as fairer, would experience greater (1b) feelings of guilt, and would be less likely (1c) to express their anger in overt behavior (anger-out). (2) It was expected that strong just world believers would be more confident of attaining their personal goals. (3) Strong just world believers were expected to experience fewer disciplinary problems during imprisonment.

**Method**

**Sample**

All participants (N = 66) were young male prisoners from a German detention center in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania. This is one third of all prisoners of this detention center and, thus, one third of all young male prisoners of Mecklenburg-West Pomerania. Their age
ranged from 15 to 24 years (M = 19.8; SD = 2.13), and the sentences they had received ranged from six months to approximately 140 months (M = 30.9; SD = 25.45). Of these, one prisoner had attended high-level secondary school ("Gymnasium"), 10 prisoners had attended mid-level secondary school ("Realschule"), 35 low-level secondary school ("Hauptschule"), and 16 special school ("Sonderschule"; 4 missing). Eleven subjects were first-time offenders, and forty-two were serving their first prison sentence. Eight prisoners were convicted of murder, manslaughter, or manslaughter through culpable negligence; two of sex crimes; twelve of physical violence; thirteen of robbery or blackmail; nineteen of theft or embezzlement; and the remaining twelve of various other crimes. Overall, these adolescents had committed a total of 1,343 recorded crimes.

Procedure

About a month before the survey was conducted, all prisoners were given a short description of the purpose and content of the study. Interested persons were invited to put their names down on lists distributed by several prison officers. In addition, some prisoners were approached directly by one of the authors during the data collection period. All subjects were reassured that their participation would be confidential, and in particular that the prison authorities would not be informed about the individual prisoner's data.

The participants were first asked to complete the questionnaire described in the following section. We then asked the 68 prisoners who completed this questionnaire for permission to consult their files for further information about their criminal career. Because two subjects refused to allow access to their records, the final sample consisted of 66 prisoners.

Research Instruments

Unless otherwise specified, all items were rated on 6-point Likert-type scales, where 1 indicated "strongly disagree" and 6 indicated "strongly agree", and scale means were used as variables. When more than one item was missing, the whole variable was defined as missing.
Just world beliefs. Following suggestions originating from earlier research (Furnham & Procter, 1989; Lerner & Miller, 1978), recent studies 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 has proved to be a better indicator of the justice motive than general BJW. Therefore, the personal BJW was taken as an indicator of the prisoners’ justice motive, and was measured using Dalbert’s (1999) Personal Belief in a Just World Scale (7 items; $\alpha = .86$, e.g., "I believe that I usually get what I deserve").

Outcome Measures. In order to test the first hypothesis, the perceived justice of the legal proceedings and feelings of guilt were investigated using newly developed scales corresponding to several items of Ortmann’s (1987) inmates’ questionnaire. Justice of the legal proceedings was assessed by four items ($\alpha = .77$; $r_{est} = .46$; e.g., "I am convinced that during my trial the judge was trying to do justice to all persons participating in the legal process"). Feelings of guilt were described by four items ($\alpha = .59$; $r_{est} = .27$; e.g., "The punishment corresponds to my guilt"). Anger expression was measured using one subscale of the German version of the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory (Spielberger, 1988; German version: Schwenkmezger, Hodapp, & Spielberger, 1992). The chosen subscale anger-out consisted of eight items ($\alpha = .85$, e.g., "I lose my composure").

To test the second hypothesis, the participants were asked to describe their goals in life, and to gauge the probability that they would be achieving these goals. First, they were asked to generate a list up to five personal goals. These included, for example, going unpunished in the future, getting rich, coming off drugs, getting married, starting a family, and starting professional training. Of course, not all participants were able to report five personal goals. Furthermore, 52 prisoners actually reported at least one goal. Those prisoners who could generate at least one goal were then asked to rate each goal in terms of its prospects of success. The response options here were $1 = 0$ per cent, $2 = 20$ per cent, $3 = 40$
per cent, 4 = 60 per cent, 5 = 80 per cent, and 6 = 100 per cent probability of attaining the desired goal.

The number of disciplinary problems occurring during the term of imprisonment was obtained from the young prisoners’ criminal files. This allowed us to test the third hypothesis.

Background and Control Variables. In addition to the BJW and the outcome variables, the personal, familial, and criminal background of the participants was also ascertained by the criminal records and by self-report data. A newly developed procedure was used to analyze the criminal records in terms of factors such as the prisoners’ biographical case history, crimes committed, and behavior in custody. Before starting our study we carefully thought about the main variables that should be especially important for the criminal career. For these variables we constructed a structured questionnaire with pre-set answer opportunities for each single variable, and the answers were taken from the criminal record. This procedure allowed us to minimize subjective rating errors.

Two variables described the prisoners’ personal background: Besides age the type of school attended was assessed where 0 = "special school" (Sonderschule), 1 = "low-level school" (Hauptschule), 2 = "mid-level school" (Realschule), and 3 = "high-level school" (Gymnasium).

In order to investigate the familial background in more detail, we followed a procedure proposed by Lamnek (1985), who suggested differentiating between structurally and emotionally dysfunctional families of origin. The feature "structurally dysfunctional family" was evaluated on a scale from 0 (no dysfunction) to 6 (strong dysfunction) by assessing one point for each of the following situations that applied: (1) residence in a children’s home; (2) illegitimacy and single parenthood; (3) the death of one or both parents; (4) parental separation or divorce; (5) frequent house moves; (6) having five or more siblings (following Göppinger, 1997, who stated that five or more siblings are critical). An "emotionally dysfunctional family" was rated on a scale from 0 (no dysfunction) to 4 (strong dysfunction;
more than three features) based on the presence of the following factors in the family of origin: alcohol or drug abuse, criminal history, mental illness, suicide attempts, and other deviant features such as violence between parents and siblings.

In addition, the emotional background of the family of origin was measured using two family climate scales included in the participant questionnaire (Goch, 1997, rule-orientation: 4 items; $\alpha = .79$; e.g., "We held rigidly to the rules existing in our family"; conflict-tendency: 5 items; $\alpha = .75$; e.g., "There was a lot of friction in our family"). In sum, two objective and two subjective variables were used to describe the participants’ familial background.

The adolescents’ criminal career was described by eight pieces of information extracted from their records: (1) age at first offense, (2) prior detentions (0 = no; 1 = yes, one or more previous custodial sentences), (3) criminal acts of violence (0 = no; 1 = yes, one or more criminal acts of violence), (4) sex crimes (0 = no; 1 = yes, one or more sex crimes), (5) number of previous convictions (ranging from 0 to 5), (6) number of total offenses in criminal career (ranging from 0 to 65), (7) number of days already spent in prison, and (8) length of prison sentence in days.

Results

In order to conservatively test our hypotheses, and show the BJW’s implication in addition to other important criminological features, all variables were structured following the theoretically assumed model. Based on this model, the investigated variables can be assigned to three different levels. Level 1: Variables describing the personal background, the familial background, the characteristics of the criminal career, as well as the personal BJW were treated as exogenous variables. Level 2: The second level comprised the perceived justice of the legal proceedings, which can be predicted by the variables of the first levels only, including personal BJW. Level 3: The outcome variables composed the final level and can thus be predicted by all other variables. Our multiple regression analyses focus in particular on two tests. First, the BJW’s possible impact on the justice of the legal proceedings and the
outcome variables was always tested against the possible influences of all other exogenous variables. Secondly, the justice of the legal proceedings’ impact on the outcome variables was tested against the possible influence of all exogenous variables including BJW. An alpha level of $p < .05$ (two-tailed) was used for all inferential statistics.

Preliminary analyses

-- insert Table 1 about here --

To begin with, the relations between the different variables were analyzed. The means, standard deviations, and correlations between the exogenous variables and the personal BJW, justice of the legal proceedings, and outcome variables are presented in Table 1. Although no direct hypotheses were formulated regarding the relations between these variables, one result is worth mentioning, the negative relationship between personal BJW and the number of days already spent in prison. Previous research has consistently found that the belief in a just world is a very stable construct that does not change over time or across various situations (for a review, see Dalbert, 2001). In this study, however, the magnitude of the personal BJW was associated with the time the prisoners had already spent in prison.

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for personal BJW, justice of the legal proceedings, and outcome variables are presented in Table 2. All variables displayed significant correlations in the expected direction. Strong just world believers perceived their legal proceedings as fairer, felt more guilty, reported using less anger-out coping, were more confident that they would be able to achieve their personal goals, and experienced fewer disciplinary problems in prison.

-- insert Table 2 about here --

Multiple regression analyses

To test the hypothesis that personal BJW is an important predictor of the outcome variables in addition to the impact of the other exogenous variables, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to identify the unique predictors of the justice of legal
proceedings and the outcome variables. The justice of the legal proceedings was regressed on all exogenous variables in a first block including BJW (entered stepwise). The four remaining outcome variables were regressed on the personal and familial background variables, the characteristics of the criminal career, and the personal BJW altogether entered stepwise in the first block, and the justice of the legal proceedings entered in the second block. In this kind of regression analyses a block of high-priority predictors is set up to compete among themselves stepwise for order of entry; then the predictor of the second block compete for entry. The regression is hierarchical over blocks, but statistical (= stepwise) within the first block (see Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001, p. 135). This procedure makes it possible to determine which variables explain variance independently of one another. Only those variables in Tables 1 and 2 that showed a significant correlation with the dependent variables were included in the respective multiple regression.

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, perceived justice of the legal proceedings correlated significantly with seven variables. These variables were allowed to compete for entry into the regression equation. Results showed that only two variables, which together accounted for 32 per cent of the variance, significantly predicted perceived justice of the legal proceedings. Participants who had fewer previous convictions and who endorsed the personal belief in a just world perceived the legal proceedings as fairer. Next we regressed each of the four outcome variables on the set of individually selected predictor variables (based on the bivariate correlations in Tables 1 and 2). The accepted regression equations explained 21 per cent of the variance in feelings of guilt, 8 per cent of the variance in anger-out, 20 per cent of the variance in prospects of success in personal goals, and 36 per cent of the variance in disciplinary problems. The more the participants perceived their legal proceedings as just, the guiltier they felt. Contrary to expectations, the personal BJW did not directly contribute to explaining feelings of guilt, though both variables significantly correlated in the expected direction (see Table 2). Rather, the effect of personal BJW on feelings of guilt was mediated...
by the perceived justice of the legal proceedings. The personal BJW turned out to be the only meaningful predictor of anger-out. The more the prisoners believed that the world is fair to them personally, the less likely they were to express their anger in overt behavior.

Furthermore, apart from the frequency of offenses in career the personal BJW played a significant role in predicting the perceived attainability of personal life goals. The fewer the prisoners committed offenses thus far and the more they endorsed the personal BJW, the more confident they were that they would succeed in achieving their personal goals. Finally, as shown by Tables 1 and 2, disciplinary problems correlated with six independent variables. In the first block time in prison, length of the prison sentence, and sex crimes were selected for the regression equation. After controlling for BJW ($p = .059$) the influence of time in prison was not longer significant ($p = .072$). Personal BJW explained a significant amount of the variance in disciplinary problems, in addition to the amount already explained by the length of the prison sentence and sex crimes. Longer prison sentences, convictions for sex crimes, and a weaker personal BJW were associated with a higher frequency of disciplinary problems in prison.

The results of the five regression analyses are summarized in Figure 1. Overall, the multiple regression analyses revealed that the personal BJW could directly explain all dependent variables apart from feelings of guilt. The relation between the personal BJW and feelings of guilt was mediated by the perceived justice of the legal proceedings. As assumed, the multiple regression analyses showed that, compared to those low in BJW, prisoners with a stronger belief in a personal just world perceived their legal proceedings as more just, and consequently, reported more feelings of guilt, described less anger-out, were more confident that they could achieve their personal goals, and revealed fewer disciplinary problems during their period of imprisonment. Moreover, these adaptive relationships of the personal BJW persisted even when controlling for personal and familial background and features of the
criminal career. As shown by Figure 1, none of the other predictors were better able to explain the perceived justice of the legal proceedings, and anger-out, than the personal BJW of the young prisoners. This was even true for feelings of guilt on which BJW revealed an indirect effect of .21 compared to an indirect effect of frequency of previous convictions of -.16 on feelings of guilt. The criminal career was a better predictor of the perceived prospects of attaining personal goals and of disciplinary problems, though personal BJW had a high effect on both variables.

Discussion

The present study is the first to investigate the implications of the BJW for the rehabilitation prospects of young prisoners. Our results indicate that the personal BJW helps to explain young prisoners’ feelings and behavior during and perhaps after imprisonment, and that this holds even when familial and personal background variables as well as characteristics of the criminal career are taken into account. For various dependent variables, personal BJW was just as important as – or even more important than – features of the criminal career. For the perceived prospect of personal goals and disciplinary problems, which were highly dependent on the youngsters’ criminal career, personal BJW contributed substantial unique variance. In this context, it is worth noting that none of the variables describing the family of origin (namely structural and emotional dysfunction, rule orientation and conflict-tendency) exhibited a significant effect in our analyses. In view of these findings, it is all the more surprising that the majority of studies focusing on the relationship between aspects of criminality, rehabilitation, and personality have not considered the role played by the belief that the world is a just place where you tend to get what you deserve.

The study was guided by just world theory and, in particular, by the three functions of the belief in a just world (Dalbert, 2001). The results support the existence of three distinct functions. To begin with, high just world believers perceived their legal proceedings to be more just and, as a consequence, felt guiltier. This can be seen as a necessary precondition for
the development of an intrinsic motivation to obey the law in the future. In order to prevent future crimes, it is particularly important for prisoners not to lose faith in the justice of the state. If they were to lose faith, there would be no reason for them to conform to societal rules and to try to avoid illegal activities in the future. Furthermore, high just world believers seem to be more able to control their angry outbursts. This ability to cope with their feelings of anger should also help them to avoid trouble in the future. Secondly, the stronger the prisoners’ personal BJW, the more confident the young prisoners were that they would be able to achieve their personal goals. The probability of success is a significant predictor of goal commitment (Metz-Göckel & Leffelsend, 2001). Thus, prisoners who have set themselves attainable goals for their life after prison should have better prospects for rehabilitation than those who either have no personal goals for the near or more distant future, or who do not believe that they will be able to achieve these goals. Working to attain personal goals such as entering one’s chosen profession, building up a new life for oneself, getting married, and starting a family, makes it less probable that individuals will sacrifice these ideals by returning to crime. Thirdly, prisoners high in personal BJW displayed less deviant behavior than those low in personal BJW during their prison term. It could be hypothesized that the more closely the prisoners obey the rules in the penal system, the more conforming their behavior will be once they have left the detention center, and the better their chances of rehabilitation will thus be. This pattern of results clearly supports the notion that justice concerns and, in particular, the personal belief in a just world impact on prisoners’ feelings and behavior. BJW was shown to predict over and above the unquestionably important impact of the previous criminal career.

However, three particular shortcomings of the present approach need to be discussed. Firstly, the sample size ($N = 66$) was relatively small. This raises concerns about the generalizability of the findings as well as the study’s power to detect significant effects. Note
that the subjects of this study represented about one third of the population of young prisoners of a whole German state.

Secondly, some may like to argue that the observed relationships can be caused by the fact that BJW and most of the dependent variables were measured through self-reports. Because all of these variables should be influenced by the prisoners’ general traits the amount of shared variance might be inflated. However, previous findings underlined that personal BJW is able to predict adaptive development of adolescents even when compared against global personality traits such as neuroticism (Dalbert & Dzuka, 2004; Dzuka & Dalbert, 2002). Although the study was conducted confidentially, the results could nevertheless be produced by the prisoner's tendency to answer in a socially desirable manner. However, the fact that BJW was significantly related to information on disciplinary problems extracted from prison records suggests that such biases are unlikely to completely account for the BJW effects observed in the present study.

Thirdly, the direction of causal relationships cannot be determined from a cross-sectional study. Caution should be taken, therefore, when interpreting these cross-sectional findings. Although a causal model was proposed, and the results were consistent with this model, further longitudinal studies are necessary before causal connections can be assumed. We argue here that the personal BJW is a stable personality disposition, that does not change over time and across situations and that serves as a resource for the adaptive development of young prisoners. In contrast to other studies, however, belief in a just world did seem to vary across time in this investigation. The adolescents’ belief in a personal just world varied with the number of days already spent in prison, but was unrelated to the length of the prison sentence received and other characteristics of the criminal career. Thus, a certain level of BJW cannot be seen as typical for a specific subgroup of prisoners. Rather, the level of BJW seems to result partly from an accommodation process to imprisonment. The longer the participants have been in prison, the weaker their personal BJW. Longitudinal studies may
help to show that an impaired personal BJW is not (only) a result of imprisonment and that a strong personal BJW is (also) a resource for further adaptive development and rehabilitation. Moreover, even if it emerged that an impaired BJW is mainly an outcome of imprisonment, it would still be the only outcome correlated with all other observed outcome descriptors and would thus be of particular importance for gaining a deeper understanding of the emotional and behavioral development of young prisoners.

We argue here that the BJW can facilitate the rehabilitation process. As plausible as this argumentation may be, longitudinal studies with post-release follow-up measurements are needed to show the impact of the personal BJW and the outcome variables on the legal and developmental rehabilitation process. Although the results provide strong evidence that the BJW functions as a personal resource capable of improving young prisoners’ rehabilitation prospects, the personal BJW clearly did not prevent the adolescents from committing crimes in the first place. The mean BJW was not lower than usual in samples of the same educational background and gender (Dalbert, 2001). In fact, the mean of the personal BJW was slightly higher than the theoretical scale midpoint and showed considerable variance (see Table 2). Furthermore, with the exception of the number of days already spent in prison, the personal BJW was independent of characteristics of the criminal career. Thus, on the one hand, it appears that the level of personal BJW does not differentiate between delinquent and non-delinquent or between more or less criminal adolescents. On the other hand, personal BJW is consistently correlated with variables that can be expected to enhance adaptive development after release from prison. We would like to argue that a high personal BJW may help deter adolescent offenders from becoming life-course persistent criminals. Our results are consistent with our hypothesis that the BJW obliges the individual to act in a rule-oriented manner, that it fosters the view that the legal system is just, that it is associated with feelings of guilt about one’s own criminal acts, enables prisoners to cope with their feelings of anger, and makes them more confident of achieving their personal goals in the future. Further
research is needed to examine whether those young prisoners with a particularly weak BJW
belong to the small group of offenders who exhibit life-course-persistent antisocial behavior
(Moffitt, 1993). The effects of the belief in a personally just world should thus be taken into
account in future criminological studies.
References


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Author Note

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Footnotes

1) Cronbach (1951) showed that alpha is dependent on the number of items, and introduced $r_{est}$ as an index of homogeneity which is independent of test length, e.g., as a "rule of thumb", a test with 16 items with $\alpha = .80$ has a $r_{est} = .20$. 


Table 1

Descriptive statistics and correlations of personal and familial background, and criminal career with BJW, justice of legal proceedings, and outcome variables (N ≤ 66)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Personal BJW</th>
<th>Justice of legal proceedings</th>
<th>Feelings of guilt</th>
<th>Anger-Out</th>
<th>Goals' prospect of success</th>
<th>Disciplinary problems</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal background</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>19.82</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.02</td>
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<td>-.21</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Type of school attended(^a)</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>-.01</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structurally dysfunctional family(^a)</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>-.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally dysfunctional family(^a)</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.00</td>
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<td>.06</td>
<td>-.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rule-orientation</td>
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<td>1.33</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>-.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conflict-tendency</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.10</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Criminal Career</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at first offense</td>
<td>14.97</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prior detentions</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.02</td>
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<td>Criminal acts of violence</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.35**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex crimes</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.35**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous convictions</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.33**</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Offenses in career</td>
<td>20.35</td>
<td>13.97</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>-.36**</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>-.36**</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time in prison</td>
<td>255.68</td>
<td>253.49</td>
<td>-.35**</td>
<td>-.38***</td>
<td>-.29*</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.49***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Length of sentence</td>
<td>926.32</td>
<td>763.50</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>-.29*</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.49***</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Data not available for all cases.
Note. Age and age at first offense were measured in years. For type of school, 0 = special school, 1 = low-level school, 2 = mid-level school, and 3 = high-level school. Structural dysfunction of family was measured on a scale from 0 (no dysfunction) to 6 (strong dysfunction), and emotional dysfunction of family, on a scale from 0 (no dysfunction) to 4 (strong dysfunction). For prior detentions, 0 = no; 1 = yes, one or more previous custodial sentences. For criminal acts of violence, 0 = no; 1 = yes, one or more criminal acts of violence. For sex crimes, 0 = no; 1 = yes, one or more sex crimes. For previous convictions and offenses in career, total numbers are reported. Time in prison and length of prison sentence are measured in days. Disciplinary problems were reported in terms of the number of offenses against prison rules (ranging from 0 to 13). All other scale values ranged from 1 to 6, with 6 indicating a strong endorsement of the construct.

a Spearman correlations; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.
Table 2

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of personal BJW, justice of legal proceedings, and outcome variables (N ≤ 66)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Personal BJW</th>
<th>Justice of legal proceedings</th>
<th>Feelings of guilt</th>
<th>Anger-Out</th>
<th>Goals’ prospect of success</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal BJW</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>1.11</td>
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<td>Justice of legal proceedings</td>
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<td>1.41</td>
<td>.46***</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcome variables</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of guilt</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>.46***</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Anger-Out</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>-.28*</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.27*</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals’ prospect of success</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.08</td>
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<td>Disciplinary problems</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>-.34**</td>
<td>-.28*</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Apart from disciplinary problems, reported in terms of the number of offenses against prison rules (ranging from 0 to 13), all scale values ranged from 1 to 6, with 6 indicating a strong endorsement of the construct.

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.
Figure 1. Empirical model for belief in a just world, justice of legal proceedings and the behavioral and emotional outcomes of young prisoners when controlling for personal and familial background and criminal career.
Just world belief and young prisoners

- Number of previous convictions
- Total offenses in criminal career
- Length of prison sentence
- Sex crimes
- Personal belief in a just world

Justice of the legal proceedings
- Feelings of guilt
- Anger-Out
- Personal goals’ prospect of success
- Disciplinary problems

Correlation coefficients:
- -0.34
- 0.46
- -0.28
- -0.32
- 0.26
- 0.24
- -0.27
- 0.37