Belief in a Just World and Life Stories

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Justice is a fundamental organizing principle of human experience, functioning simultaneously as a moral value, a social norm, and a psychological necessity that supports the sense of order, predictability, and personal coherence. Experiences of injustice do not only affect concrete outcomes but challenge individuals' basic assumptions about the relationship between actions, values, and consequences. For this reason, justice occupies a central place in psychological theories concerned with meaning-making and self-regulation.

One of the most influential approaches to this problem is the theory of Belief in a Just World (BJW), which conceptualizes justice as a motivational belief that allows individuals to preserve a sense of order and meaning even in the face of unfairness. Previous research has shown that BJW is associated with emotional regulation, perceived control, and well-being. However, most studies rely on questionnaire-based methods and focus on outcomes, leaving relatively unexplored the ways in which BJW operates within lived experience itself.

The present dissertation addresses this gap by examining the role of personal and general Belief in a Just World in autobiographical narratives of experienced injustice. Rather than treating BJW solely as an abstract belief, the study explores how it is implicitly manifested in the way individuals remember, interpret, and narrate unjust life events. Autobiographical narratives are approached as a key medium through which individuals organize experience, maintain narrative identity, and integrate emotionally challenging events into a coherent life story.

The main objective of the dissertation is to investigate the influence of personal and general BJW on the structure and interpretation of autobiographical narratives of injustice, as well as on the current psychological consequences associated with these narratives. In addition, the study examines the relationship between BJW and individuals' present evaluation of the social environment. Particular attention is given to narrative elements that function as mediators between stable beliefs and current consequences.

To achieve this aim, an original qualitative coding model was developed, grounded in narrative theory and the established structure of personal narratives. The model incorporates

key narrative components—evaluation, resolution, outcome, and consequences—and adapts them to the analysis of injustice narratives. Personal and general BJW are conceptualized as elements of the internal context that influence both the experience of the event and its later narration.

Within this framework, narrative self-evaluation is operationalized through positive and negative self-presentation, reflecting how individuals evaluate their own actions and moral position. Agency is captured through the presence or absence of attempts at resolution and through whether such attempts are described as successful. Outcome integration is assessed through the valence of the narrative resolution, ranging from negative to positive endings. Current consequences are coded as indicators of how the narrated experience continues to function in the present, including motivation or demotivation, emotional tone, lessons derived from the experience, and persuasive intent toward others.

The empirical material consists of 291 autobiographical narratives of experienced injustice, which were subjected to systematic qualitative coding based on the developed scheme. Quantitative analyses were then conducted to examine the relationships between BJW, narrative mediators, and current consequences.

The results reveal a consistent pattern supporting the conceptualization of Belief in a Just World as an implicit motivational construct with a protective and regulatory function. Both personal and general BJW are related to the way unjust experiences are structured and interpreted in autobiographical narratives, but they operate through different narrative pathways.

Personal BJW is primarily associated with the tendency toward meaningful narrative closure through positive or restorative outcomes. Individuals with higher personal BJW are more likely to structure their stories in ways that restore a sense of order and justice, suggesting that this form of belief functions mainly as an internal emotional-regulatory resource.

General BJW, in contrast, is more strongly related to positive self-presentation and value-consistent behavior within the narrative, even when the event remains unresolved or ends negatively. Its adaptive role appears to be linked less to emotional relief and more to the maintenance of moral self-coherence and predictability of behavior in the social world.

In both cases, BJW demonstrates a protective function by reducing the discrepancy between the experience of injustice and the belief in an ordered and predictable world. Associations with current consequences indicate that this regulatory function manifests on

emotional, motivational, and social levels. Additional analyses of the general evaluation of the social environment further support the distinction between personal and general BJW, suggesting that the former functions primarily as an emotional-regulatory resource, while the latter contributes to cognitive management of social uncertainty.

Overall, the findings position Belief in a Just World as an implicit motivational principle that operates not only at the level of explicit beliefs but also at the level of narrative organization and meaning-making. The study shows that individuals do not merely believe that the world is just; they narrate their experiences in ways that symbolically restore or preserve justice, thereby supporting coherence, identity, and psychological regulation.