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Age and Gender Differences in Beliefs About Personal Power and Injustice

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Abstract

College students and community-dwelling older adults were compared on Injustice and Personal Power scales and measures of religiosity. Personal Power scores varied significantly as a function of age and gender. These differences were due to significantly lower belief in Personal Power for the group of older women. As predicted, Injustice scores were significantly higher for women than for men, reflecting a greater belief that conditions can be unjust. No significant difference between older and younger adults on Injustice scores was obtained. Significant positive correlations between measures of religiosity and Injustice scores were obtained, while religiosity was not significantly correlated with Personal Power scores. This pattern of results suggests that there is value in utilizing separate measures of Injustice and Personal Power. Suggestions are made for further examining the complex relationship among demographic variables, belief in a just world, and measures of religiosity.

Age and Gender Differences in Beliefs About Personal Power and Injustice

According to the just world hypothesis, individuals need to believe that people usually get what they deserve in this world (Lerner & Miller, 1978). Belief in a just world (BJW) is seen as allowing individuals to see the world as orderly and stable, which in turn provides the foundation for meaningful action in the world. Without an understanding of the world as a place where actions have lawful and predictable consequences, individuals would have difficulty establishing a basis for actions in everyday life.

Since its formulation in the mid-1960s, the BJW concept has generated considerable research. Among the many variables with which BJW has been correlated are religiosity (Finamore & Carlson, 1987; Furnham & Gunter, 1984; Rubin & Peplau, 1973; Sorrentino & Hardy, 1974; Zweigenhaft, Phillips, Adams, Morse, & Horan, 1985) and locus of control (Lerner, 1980; Rubin & Peplau, 1973; Zuckerman & Gerbasi, 1977a,b). Much of this research has utilized the Just World Scale (JWS) developed by Rubin and Peplau (1973, 1975).

Rubin and Peplau (1975) have suggested that BJW may be cultivated by religions such as Judaism and Christianity that teach that God is just and that good deeds are rewarded and bad deeds are punished. Early research on religiosity and BJW revealed a significant positive relationship. Rubin and Peplau (1973), for example, found significant correlations between scores on the JWS and church/synagogue attendance ($r = +.42$) and between scores on the JWS and belief in an active God ($r = +.31$). More recently, Zweigenhaft et al. (1985) have suggested that the relationship between religiosity and BJW is more complex. They have proposed that both qualitative and quantitative differences in the measurement of religious beliefs and behaviors may differentially predict BJW. For example, significant denominational differences on the BJW measure were obtained among Catholics, Jews, Quakers, Protestants, and Agnostics. In addition to the denominational differences, Zweigenhaft et al. (1985) found a range of correlations

between measures of religiosity and BJW. Correlations between JWS scores and importance of religion, for example, ranged from +.41 (Catholics) to -.45 (Baptists). Clearly, additional research is needed to unravel the complex relationship between religiosity and BJW.

Another unresolved issue that has recently received attention has been the multidimensional nature of the just world concept (Furnham & Procter, 1989; O'Neill, Duffy, Enman, Blackmer, Goodwin, & Campbell, 1988). Furnham and Procter (1989) suggest that there may be different domains (or worlds) in which the BJW may vary. For example, it may be possible for individuals to believe in a just world in the personal domain but not in the broader societal domain.

Related to the issue of domains within which an individual may or may not exhibit BJW is the well-documented relationship between BJW and locus of control. Rubin and Peplau (1973), for example, reported a correlation of - .41 between measures of BJW and locus of control (where higher scores indicate an external locus of control). The ability to control one's own life appears to be an important component of the BJW. Research on aging and locus of control (Lachman, 1986; Molinari & Niederehe, 1984) has revealed that, again, it appears to be necessary to refer to specific domains. Although no age differences were found on generalized measures of locus of control, Lachman (1986) found that the elderly were more external on health-specific dimensions of locus of control. Molinari and Niederehe (1984) found that older adults were significantly more external on a "chance" dimension of externality (belief that chance or fate controls what happens in their lives), but they were not more external on a dimension assessing belief that powerful others control events in their lives.

Recent studies of aging and perceptions of self-efficacy shed some additional light on developmental changes in beliefs about personal control. Woodward and Wallston (1987), for example, found that perceived self-efficacy (defined by Bandura, 1982, as involving judgments of one's ability to act successfully in prospective situations) was lower for individuals over the age of

60, at least in areas related to health and day-to-day living. Cornelius and Caspi (1986) looked specifically at intellectual self-efficacy and found it remained constant with age during midlife but declined in old age. In contrast, Godin and Shephard (1985), who looked at both gender and age differences in perceptions of physical self-efficacy, found no evidence of an age effect, but did find that males had significantly higher physical self-efficacy than females. Further research is needed to assess the impact of gender on age-related issues of control.

In an attempt to separate belief in a just world from belief in personal control, O'Neill et al. (1988) created two independent scales: the Injustice (Ij) scale reflects a willingness to believe that conditions can be unjust, whereas the Personal Power (PP) scale reflects a belief in one's own internal control, or that of one's group, without necessarily extending this belief of control to people in general (see Appendix for scale items). O'Neill et al. (1988) provide evidence that these scales provide independent measures of belief in possible injustices in society and belief in personal power. The present study utilized these Ij and PP scales to explore age and gender differences in BJW and also to examine the relationship of BJW to measures of religiosity.

In a recent review of the BJW literature, Furnham and Procter (1989) identified the systematic study of the relationship between BJW and demographic variables as an area that has been seriously neglected by researchers. For example, they reported only two studies that found a correlation of BJW with age. One study (Smith & Green, 1984) found a positive correlation (but only for women), while the second study (Peplau & Tyler, 1975) found a negative correlation (but only for men). The significance of this paucity of research is that these variables of age, gender, and race may be the very areas in which differences in BJW are most likely to be observed. Furnham and Procter (1989), for example, proposed that possibly the most important single factor that influences whether or not one believes in a just world is one's direct experience with injustice. If one assumes that minorities, women, and older individuals are more likely to have experienced

injustice, one straightforward prediction would be that individuals in these groups would be less likely to have a strong belief in a just world.

In order to examine these important issues identified by Furnham and Procter (1989), we asked young and older adults to respond to statements intended to measure both their belief in injustice in the world and their belief in their own ability to control events in their lives (see Appendix). In addition, in order to measure religiosity, we asked the participants about religious affiliation, church attendance, and importance of religion.

Because Furnham and Procter (1989) proposed that belief in a just world is strongly mediated by personal experience with injustice, we predicted that older individuals (who may have experienced both lifelong and recent multiple losses) would be more likely than young adults to believe in injustice in the world. Because being female may result in additional burdens associated with aging, we expected that the increased belief in injustice might be especially evident for older women.

We also hypothesized that older adults' belief in personal power would be less than that of younger adults. That is, congruent with findings reported by Lachman (1986) and Molinari and Niederehe (1984), we expected that older adults in our study would be more external than younger adults when predicting control over events in their lives.

While results of early research were indicative that more religious individuals were more likely to expect rewards and punishment as a direct result of personal merit (Rubin & Peplau, 1973), we predicted that the relationship between measures of religiosity and BJW might vary significantly among denominations, reflecting qualitative differences in the ways in which individuals express their religiosity (Zweigenhaft et al., 1985).

Thus, the primary purpose of the present study was to explore the BJW as it relates to the demographic factors of age and gender. A secondary purpose was to further examine the complex

relationship between BJW and religiosity. In order to be able to separately address BJW and belief about personal control, O'Neill et al.'s (1988) Injustice and Personal Power scales were utilized.

Method

Participants

One hundred seventy-one subjects participated in the study (62 male, 109 female; 142 white, 4 black, 5 Asian, 16 hispanic, 4 "other"). Four groups of subjects were used. Students at two church-affiliated liberal arts colleges and one state university and one group of older adults were sampled. Fifty-three subjects (24 male and 29 female) were from an Assemblies of God college, 48 (14 male and 34 female) were from a Lutheran (Missouri Synod) college, 43 (10 male and 33 female) were from a state university, and 27 (14 male and 13 female) community-dwelling older adults were sampled. Subjects from the first three groups were obtained by sampling two classes at each California institution. Only data from subjects between the ages of 17 and 25 ($M = 20.9$, $SD = 1.8$) were examined. The group of older adults was obtained by informal sampling from groups in Kansas City, Missouri, including an exercise class at a local YMCA and a Methodist church. For this group of older adults, only data from those over the age of 60 (range: 60-86, $M = 68.6$, $SD = 6.1$) were examined.

Materials

An attitude scale (O'Neill et al., 1988) containing Personal Power (PP) and Injustice (Ij) scales and a checksheet covering demographic variables and measures of religiosity (Gorsuch & McFarland, 1972) were utilized. Higher scores on PP reflect a greater sense of personal power, while higher scores on Ij reflect a greater belief that conditions can be *unjust*. Note that the scoring on the Ij scale is in the opposite direction to that of the JWS (Rubin & Peplau, 1973, 1975), where higher scores reflect a greater belief in a *just* world.

The measures of religiosity used were importance of religion to the individual (9-point scale from “not important at all” to “extremely important”) and frequency of attendance at religious worship services (5-point scale from “less than several times a year” to “more than once a week”). Subjects also indicated their religious preference from the following: none; Lutheran; Presbyterian; Baptist; Methodist; Catholic; Episcopal; Jewish; Latter Day Saints; Christian (non-denominational); Pentecostal (non-Assembly of God); Assembly of God; other. Subjective judgments of general health were also assessed (9-point scale from “very poor” to “excellent”).

Procedure

Subjects were given 15 minutes to complete the two one-page “questionnaires.” All subjects completed the attitude scale prior to responding to the checklist. Subjects in the college and university groups completed the scales in-class, while subjects in the older group completed the scales individually at their convenience. All subjects completed the scales anonymously.

Results

Preliminary analyses revealed no statistically significant differences among the college groups for either Personal Power, $F(2,141) = 2.514, p > .05$, or Injustice, $F(2,141) = 1.511, p > .05$. Scores for subjects in these college groups were therefore combined for subsequent analyses.

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations of both Personal Power and Injustice scores for all age-gender combinations. The scale scores were analyzed in separate 2 (Age) X 2 (Gender) analyses of variance.

Personal Power

Analysis of PP scores revealed a statistically significant interaction between Age and Gender, $F(1,167) = 10.497, p < .001$. A post-hoc analysis revealed that this effect was due to significantly lower PP scores for the women in the Older group than for each of the other three

groups ($p < .01$). This observed difference clearly underlies the statistically significant main effects of Age, $F(1,167) = 9.197, p < .005$ and Gender, $F(1,167) = 5.123, p < .05$.

Injustice

Analysis of Ij scores revealed a statistically significant effect of Gender, $F(1,167) = 4.736, p < .05$. Mean Ij scores for males and females were 6.4 and 7.0, respectively, reflecting a greater willingness for women to believe that conditions can be unjust. There was no significant main effect of Age and no significant interaction between Age and Gender ($p > .10$).

Religiosity

Overall, statistically significant positive correlations of Ij scores with the measures of religiosity were obtained ($r = +.22, p < .05$ for Attendance; $r = +.24, p < .05$ for Importance of Religion). Statistically non-significant correlations of PP scores with Attendance ($r = +.06, p > .05$) and Importance of Religion ($r = -.03, p > .05$) were obtained.

In order to look more closely at the pattern of correlational results, these relationships were examined for each of the religious groups. Table 2 presents the correlations between Ij and the measures of religiosity and between PP and the same measures for the religious groups identified by ten or more individuals (Baptist $n=10$; Methodist $n=10$; Lutheran $n=43$; Catholic $n=29$; Christian $n=32$; Assembly of God $n=27$). Examination of Table 2 reveals a wide range of correlations, with high positive correlations between Ij scores and both Attendance and Importance of Religion for the Baptist subgroup standing out. The statistically significant correlation between Importance of Religion and Injustice scores for the Baptist subgroup is certainly consistent with Zweigenhaft et al.'s (1985) finding of a correlation of $-.45$ between JWS scores and importance of religion.

Stepwise multiple regression analyses were used to further examine the relationships between PP scores, Ij scores, Attendance, Importance of Religion, Age, and Health. For PP

scores, Ij scores (coefficient = -0.258, $SE = 0.070$) and Age (coefficient = -0.025, $SE = 0.008$) were retained, accounting for approximately 12.4% of the variability in PP scores. For Ij scores, PP scores (coefficient = -.296, $SE = 0.075$) and Attendance (coefficient = 0.317, $SE = 0.095$) were retained. Together, these factors accounted for approximately 13.1% of the variability in Ij scores. Consistent with the results of the analyses of variance, age was a significant predictor of PP scores but not of Ij scores.

Relationship of PP and Ij scores

Overall, a correlation of -.26 between PP and Ij scores was observed. When the relationship between these scales was examined by religious group, the correlations ranged from -.44 (Lutheran) to +.25 (Baptist) to -.49 (Methodist) to -.52 (Catholic) to -.27 (Christian) to +.02 (Assembly of God). As with the correlations between Ij and the measures of religiosity, the Baptist subgroup tends to stand out.

Discussion

In this study we have reported several straightforward findings. First, according to the Personal Power scale scores reported here, when both age and gender were considered, older women were reliably less likely than the other three age groups (younger women, younger men, and older men) to report having a sense of personal power over life's events. Second, according to the Injustice scale scores reported here, women were reliably more likely than men to believe that conditions in the world can be unjust, but this belief did not differ as a function of age. Third, Injustice scores, but not Personal Power scores, were reliably related to two measures of religiosity (worship attendance and rated importance of religion). Finally, we have reported stochastic independence when assessing age and gender effects on the dimensions of Personal Power and Injustice. That is, because we observed a different pattern of results when assessing age and gender effects for Personal Power than we found when assessing age and gender effects

for Injustice, we support the need to separate these dimensions in future research. O'Neill et al.'s (1988) new scales appear to have useful application for this purpose.

Based on research in the areas of aging and locus of control, and aging and self-efficacy, we hypothesized that older adults' belief in personal power would be less than that of younger adults (Cornelius and Caspi, 1986; Lachman, 1986; Molinari & Niederehe, 1984; Woodward and Wallston, 1987). Although we found a significant main effect of age for PP scores, this effect was due to the significantly lower PP scores for older women, compared to older men, younger men, or younger women. Godin and Shephard (1985) did find that males had significantly higher physical self-efficacy than females, but they found no evidence of an age effect. Further work is clearly needed both to replicate the current finding of lower PP scores for older women and to begin to understand the reasons underlying such differences.

Furnham and Procter (1989) have suggested that the most important predictor of BJW is the extent to which an individual has directly experienced injustice. The significantly higher Ij scores for women than for men observed in this study is consistent with predictions derived from the Furnham and Procter (1989) observation. However, a similar prediction that older individuals would have significantly higher Ij scores was not supported. The nature of the relationship between demographic variables and BJW is likely to prove to be complex, depending on a number of variables, including not only the extent to which injustice has been experienced, but also characteristics of individuals' social support network. Because our sample was overwhelmingly white (83%), we were unable to systematically examine race differences in BJW, another demographic variable for which differences in mean Ij scores are predicted.

The finding of overall significant relationships between Ij scores and measures of religiosity is certainly consistent with findings reported by Rubin and Peplau (1973); however, the pattern of denominational differences in this relationship attests to its complexity. In particular, the results

for the Baptist subgroup deserve comment. Baptists were more likely to acknowledge injustice in the world the more important their religion was to them and the more frequently they attended worship services. It may be that a greater emphasis on personal salvation and eternal life allows Baptists to more easily acknowledge that life on earth is not just. Similar results for a Baptist subgroup (and a Quaker subgroup) were obtained by Zweigenhaft et al. (1985), who suggested that this relation between religiosity and belief in a just world helps to maintain conceptual order in a complex life.

This study provided the opportunity to further examine the utility of O'Neill et al.'s (1988) new scales of Injustice and Personal Power. The different pattern of age-gender results obtained for these scales tends to support the need to separately assess these dimensions. Only a significant Gender effect was observed for Ij scores, whereas a significant interaction between Gender and Age was observed for PP scores. The observed correlation of $-.26$ between PP and Ij differs from the nonsignificant values reported by O'Neill et al. ($r = -.06$ and $+.002$ in a test-retest procedure), who stated that their "theoretical position demanded that we show that the scales did not correlate with one another" (p. 1071). Three of our subgroups of religious groups (Lutheran, Methodist, Catholic) generated negative correlations between PP and Ij scores of greater than $-.40$. Clearly, further work with these scales is needed to explain the disparity observed between our studies.

The multidimensional nature of the just world concept provides several avenues for future research efforts. The nature of the complex relationship between BJW and demographic variables represents one such needed line of research. Further work examining age and gender differences in beliefs about unjust conditions in society is needed, as is research exploring the relationship between BJW and other demographic variables such as race. Finally, the bases of denominational differences in the direction and magnitude of the relationship between BJW and measures of

religiosity (not just the existence of such differences) need to be examined in future investigations of the belief in a just world.

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Table 1

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations on the Personal Power and Injustice Scales for College and Older Groups

Gender	Age	
	Young	Old
Personal Power		
Male		
<i>M</i>	8.2	8.3
<i>SD</i>	1.7	1.8
Female		
<i>M</i>	8.6	6.2
<i>SD</i>	1.8	1.8
Injustice		
Male		
<i>M</i>	6.4	6.1
<i>SD</i>	2.1	1.4
Female		
<i>M</i>	7.0	7.3
<i>SD</i>	1.9	1.2

Table 2

Correlation coefficients between Injustice (Ij) scores, Personal Power (PP) scores and Measures of Religiosity by Denomination

Denomination	Measure of Religiosity	
	Attendance	Importance
	Injustice (Ij)	
Lutheran	.10	.10
Baptist	.71*	.78**
Methodist	.65*	.11
Catholic	.03	.08
Christian	.01	.38*
A.G.	.14	-.16
	Personal Power (PP)	
Lutheran	.16	.01
Baptist	.03	-.14
Methodist	-.50	-.33
Catholic	-.06	-.24
Christian	.11	.17
A.G.	.14	.07

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Appendix

Injustice (Ij) and Personal Power (PP) Scale Items

- **1. Trusting to fate has never turned out as well for me as deciding to take a definite course of action.
- *2. People usually get what they deserve in this world.
- **3. Many times I feel that I might as well decide what to do by flipping a coin.
- *4. Many people suffer through no fault of their own.
- **5. What happens to me is my own doing.
- *6. People who are lonely should have learned to get along with others.
- **7. I don't like to plan too far ahead because I usually cannot tell how things will turn out.
- *8. Our courts often let the guilty go free while they convict innocent people.
- **9. My misfortunes usually result from the mistakes I make.
- *10. People who suffer from depression are too easily hurt by events.
- **11. Sometimes I think that I don't have enough control over the direction my life is taking.
- *12. Political candidates who stick up for their principles often fail to get elected.
- **13. If I plan carefully enough, I'm sure I can achieve my goals.
- *14. Those who protect themselves adequately are rarely victims of crime.
- **15. Luck has played an important role in my life.
- *16. Many careful drivers die in accidents that were not their fault.
- **17. I can get people to do what I want them to do, if I use the right approach.
- *18. Parents often overlook the most admirable qualities in their children.
- **19. Often I feel that I have very little influence over the things that happen to me.
- *20. People are often hurt by bad reputations that they did nothing to deserve.
- **21. Bad things that happen to me are often the result of bad luck.

*22. People are often victims of crime just because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

* Injustice (Ij) scale items

** Personal Power (PP) scale items