

# Coping With Threats to Just-World Beliefs: Derogate, Blame, or Help?<sup>1</sup>

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The present research investigated Lerner's (1970, 1980) just-world theory by manipulating victim-related factors in a scenario and measuring several possible strategies for dealing with the threat to participants' just-world beliefs created by the victim's intense suffering. Participants read a story about a victim who varied in terms of his character (likeable vs. unlikeable) and behavioral responsibility for causing his accident (high vs. low). The general pattern of results showed that for the unlikeable low-responsibility victim, the primary response to protect justice beliefs appeared to be character derogation; for the likeable high-responsibility victim, the primary protective strategy appeared to be blame; and for the likeable low-responsibility victim, the primary protective strategy appeared to be compensation. Implications for just-world theory are discussed.

In our daily activities, we frequently see or hear about people who suffer from various plights (e.g., victims of crime, accidents, disease, or poverty). Although societal norms dictate that we should be sympathetic and helpful to those who are suffering (Berkowitz, 1973), our own motives sometimes can deter us from acting generously. As Lerner (1980) noted, "there is a limit to which even the most saintly among us can tolerate being in the presence of human misery" (p. 89).

Responding positively to a victim can be inconvenient, unpleasant, stressful, and dangerous. Research over the past 40 years on people's responses to different types of victims has found that, instead of offering assistance, people often will ignore or even respond negatively to victims (see Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Olson & Hafer, 1996, 2001).

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Melvin Lerner (1970, 1980) developed a theory that helps to explain why people may react negatively to victims. According to Lerner's (1970) just-world hypothesis, we all want to believe that people's fates and fortunes are contingent on their actions and character. In other words, we want to believe that "good" people will be rewarded with good fortune, and "bad" people will get their "just desserts." Holding this belief gives people a sense of security that they themselves will be exempt from suffering undeserved misfortunes.

Perceivers' just-world beliefs are typically threatened when something terrible happens to another person. To protect their sense of justice and to reaffirm their beliefs, people can use one or more of several possible strategies. Sometimes assistance can be provided to victims that will reduce their suffering. This alternative can resolve the injustice directly. Alternatively, perceivers can decide that the victims deserved to suffer. For instance, their misfortune can be attributed to reckless behavior. Or they can be judged to be bad, unworthy persons whose suffering is not unjust, even if they did not cause the outcome directly. Making these rationalizations allows people to maintain their belief that a similar misfortune will not occur to them, as long as they are careful and are of "good" character (Lerner & Miller, 1978).

The purpose of the present research is to extend previous just-world research by providing participants with multiple ways of dealing with a threat to their just-world beliefs and examining the use of various strategies in different conditions. Specifically, following exposure to a suffering victim whose likeability (character) and behavioral responsibility were manipulated, participants were given opportunities to derogate, blame, and compensate the victim. Previous researchers have provided one or two of these options to participants, but, to our knowledge, there has not been an experiment that has included assessment of all three possible reactions.

### Positive Responses to Victims

Though not part of the literature on belief in a just world (BJW), many studies have examined situational and personal influences on prosocial or helping behavior (for a review, see Schroeder, Penner, Dovidio, & Piliavin, 1995). People may offer help to victims for a number of reasons. Some instances of helping seem to be driven by altruistic motives (Batson, 1991); whereas others seem to be driven more by egoistic motives, such as reducing one's own heightened distress (Piliavin, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Clark, 1981) or making oneself feel good (Cialdini, Darby, & Vincent, 1973). According

to Hafer and Bègue (2005), however, help to victims seldom has been included as a dependent measure in BJW research, despite Lerner's (1980) assertion that it is an important and rational strategy for maintaining just-world beliefs.

In BJW experiments that have granted participants the opportunity to help a victim, the dependent measure usually has been the allocation of monetary compensation. For example, in one of the first just-world experiments (Lerner & Simmons, 1966), participants watched a fellow student (actually a confederate) receive electric shocks for incorrect responses in a learning task. In one condition, participants were given the option of deciding whether the victim would be reassigned to a reward condition in which she would receive money or instead remain in the shock condition. Most participants decided to reassign the victim to the reward condition and subsequently rated her character positively. Participants in another condition, however, were not given the option to reassign the victim to the reward condition, and subsequently responded by rating the victim's character less favorably (cf. Lincoln & Levinger, 1972).

These findings suggest that people may favor acting prosocially toward a victim when the opportunity exists. It should be noted, however, that it is often easier and less costly to help a victim in a laboratory setting than in real-life situations, where helping can be dangerous (e.g., in emergency situations) or very difficult (e.g., for victims described in the mass media).

### Negative Responses to Victims

According to Lerner (1980), victims sometimes are derogated because they possess negative qualities or are aesthetically displeasing. A person who has negative character flaws or poor personal hygiene tends to arouse feelings of revulsion, rather than empathy (e.g., Kerr, Bull, MacCoun, & Rathborn, 1985; Lerner & Simmons, 1966).

When, however, a suffering victim is virtuous or attractive, derogating his or her character becomes a less viable option. Instead, people may restore their threatened just-world beliefs by blaming the victim for acting carelessly or foolishly (Lerner & Miller, 1978). In an experiment by Jones and Aronson (1973), for example, participants read a vignette describing a rape in which the victim was a virgin, a married woman, or a divorcée. Although measures of the participants' perceptions of the victim's character were not administered, it was presumed that participants would have difficulty derogating the character of the virgin and the married woman, compared to the divorcée. The researchers found that the virgin and the married

victim were held more responsible behaviorally for the rape than was the divorcée.

To our knowledge, only one study has manipulated both a victim's character and behavioral responsibility before assessing reactions to the victim. Karuza and Carey (1984) had participants watch a videotaped interview with a supposed rape victim; her responses to the interviewer's questions gave participants clues to her character (good or bad) and actions before the rape (careful or careless). Results showed that the bad victim was derogated more than was the good victim, and the careless victim was deemed more behaviorally responsible for the rape than was the careful victim. The interaction between character and responsibility was not significant for either derogation or blame. These findings are consistent with the idea that derogation and blame might provide alternative avenues for dealing with threats to the belief in a just world.

### Multiple Responses to Victims

Positive and negative responses to victims are not mutually exclusive. Kenrick, Reich, and Cialdini (1976) conducted an experiment in which participants watched a female "learner" make incorrect answers and receive what appeared to be painful electric shocks. Half of the participants were asked to evaluate the victim's character and, subsequently, to indicate how much money she deserved as compensation. The remaining participants were first given the opportunity to compensate and then had the chance to rate the victim's character. Kenrick et al. found that participants who rated the victim before they had the chance to compensate her derogated her character significantly more than did participants who rated the victim after compensating her. Nonetheless, participants who evaluated her character before having the chance to help her proposed just as much compensation as did participants who helped her before having the chance to evaluate her.

With a few exceptions (e.g., Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2001; Drout & Gaertner, 1994; Foley & Pigott, 2000; Karuza & Carey, 1984; Kenrick et al., 1976; Lerner & Simmons, 1966), researchers have limited participants to one option for protecting threatened just-world beliefs. Unfortunately, limiting the scope of options may produce results that are unrepresentative of the complex ways in which individuals cope with unjust situations in everyday life (where several justice-restoring options typically are available). Following exposure to the justice-threatening scenario in the present study, participants were given a more complete set of options (derogating, blaming, and compensating) for reducing threats to their just-world beliefs.

### Underlying Mechanisms

Although just-world research has yielded much useful knowledge about people's responses to victims, direct evidence for the hypothesized mediating mechanism has been missing. Do unjust situations spontaneously elicit thoughts about justice, with the goal of defending just-world beliefs? In an attempt to answer this question directly, Hafer (2000a) administered a modified Stroop task to participants immediately following their exposure to an assault victim, before they had a chance to use deliberative threat-reducing strategies (e.g., character derogation).

In a standard Stroop task, participants are asked to name the ink color of stimulus words that are presented to them. It takes people longer to do this accurately when the semantic meaning of the stimulus word interferes with the naming of the ink color (for a review, see MacLeod, 1991). Stroop interference has been documented for words that are relevant to a person's current emotional state (e.g., Mogg, Mathews, Bird, & MacGregor-Morris, 1990). Hafer (2000a) found that participants who had read about a highly unjust situation (an assault victim whose assailants had not been caught) showed longer latencies in identifying the color of justice-related words than neutral words, presumably because thoughts about justice were accessible and interfered with color naming. In contrast, participants who were exposed to an otherwise identical version of the scenario in which the perpetrators had been caught and jailed (thus, justice was restored, at least partially) did not show the same interference for justice-related words. These results support the hypothesis that people's just-world beliefs are threatened spontaneously by exposure to unjust situations. In the present study, we used the same Stroop task to assess threat to participants' just-world beliefs in each of our experimental conditions.

### Individual Differences in Just-World Beliefs

In Lerner's (1970) original just-world theory, it was assumed that all people would react to instances of injustice in a relatively uniform manner. It has since been found, however, that responses to victims may be moderated by individual differences in the extent to which people believe that the world is just (for reviews, see Furnham, 2003; Furnham & Procter, 1989).

Rubin and Peplau (1975) developed a 20-item Belief in a Just World scale that was designed to measure individual differences in just-world beliefs. This scale has been included in many justice-related studies, some of which have replicated earlier findings, while additionally demonstrating that responses to victims were more extreme among strong just-world believers

than among weak just-world believers. For example, it has been shown that strong believers will derogate (e.g., Zuckerman et al., 1974, as cited in Furnham & Procter, 1989), blame (e.g., Kleinke & Meyer, 1990), and compensate (e.g., Foley & Pigott, 2000; Miller, 1977) victims to a greater extent than will weak believers. These findings may be limited by the fact that most of these experiments provided participants with only one option for dealing with threats to just-world beliefs.

Rubin and Peplau's (1975) scale has received its share of criticism (see Hafer & Bègue, 2005), mostly on the grounds that it has low internal consistency. Furnham and Procter's (1989) review of the literature reported coefficient alphas ranging from .53 to .81 for the scale, and raised the issue of whether the scale is unidimensional or, instead, has multiple underlying dimensions. Hafer and Bègue stressed the importance of using experimental manipulations to test the principles of Lerner's (1970) just-world theory, but suggested that individual-difference measures can be used in a supplementary fashion to garner "support for the presumed mediator underlying the effects of situational manipulations" (p. 7).

### The Present Study

In the present study, participants read a newspaper story about a man who had been hit by a car and severely injured. To ensure that there was a sufficiently strong threat to people's just-world beliefs to elicit defensive responses (see Kerr et al., 1985; Simons & Piliavin, 1972; Stokols & Schopler, 1973), the victim's degree of suffering was high in all conditions: The accident left him paralyzed from the waist down. Thus, participants in all conditions were expected to experience threats to their just-world beliefs. Later in the article, information was introduced suggesting that the victim's character was either "good" (a volunteer youth sports coach; likeable) or "bad" (a person who had sold drugs to youths; unlikeable). Additional information manipulated the behavioral responsibility of the victim and the perpetrator. In the low victim-responsibility condition, the victim was hit by a car while he was crossing the street legally at a green light (i.e., the driver of the car ran a red light). In the high victim-responsibility condition, the victim was struck while crossing the street illegally on a red light when the driver had a green light.

There were four possible responses to threats to just-world beliefs that were assessed by the dependent measures: one implicit measure of the degree of threat, and three explicit measures of ways to reduce threat. The implicit measure of degree of threat was a modified Stroop task that

involved naming the color of the font of masks (i.e., strings of the letter X), preceded by words with justice and nonjustice meanings (Hafer, 2000a). The explicit measures included two negative responses to the victim: characterological derogation and attribution of blame/responsibility for the accident. In addition, an explicit measure of positive responses to the victim was obtained: an opportunity to award monetary compensation to the victim in a civil trial. On the implicit measure of threat (i.e., the modified Stroop task)—which was measured before participants had an explicit chance to derogate, blame, or compensate the victim—it was predicted that participants would be slower to identify the colors of Xs following justice-related words than following nonjustice words, because threat to just-world beliefs was expected to occur in all conditions.

The principal hypotheses pertained to the effects of the victim's likeability and responsibility on the dependent measures of derogation, blame, and compensation. We predicted that each of the four victims would threaten people's just-world beliefs; but given the differences in the victim's likeability and responsibility, the chosen modes of restoring just-world beliefs would vary across conditions.

First, it was expected that derogation would be utilized as a response to threat by participants in the unlikeable (drug dealer) victim conditions. The unsavory character of the drug dealer was expected to lead participants to deal with threat to just-world beliefs by derogating the attractiveness of the victim; this avenue was not easily available to participants who read about the likeable (volunteer) victim. Of course, some derogation of the drug dealer would be expected, even in the absence of threat to just-world beliefs (e.g., even if the drug dealer had not been victimized), but we expected a pattern of derogation that would support the interpretation that derogation is at least partly defensive. Specifically, we thought that the low-responsibility drug dealer would be derogated significantly more than would the high-responsibility drug dealer because the latter case would also allow threat reduction via blame. To summarize, we predicted a main effect for the victim's likeability and a Likeability  $\times$  Responsibility interaction on the measure of derogation.

Second, it was expected that blame would be employed as a response to threat by participants in the high responsibility conditions. When the victim was careless, blame would provide an easy avenue to threat reduction. Of course, blaming the careless victim could simply reflect veridical processing, rather than an attempt to protect one's just-world beliefs, but we expected a pattern of blame that supports the interpretation that blame is at least partly defensive. Specifically, we expected that participants would blame the likeable high-responsibility victim significantly more than the unlikeable high-responsibility victim because the latter case would also allow threat

reduction via derogation, as explained previously. When the victim was likeable but careless, derogation was not an easy option, which left blame as the only straightforward alternative. To summarize, we predicted a main effect for the victim's responsibility and a Likeability  $\times$  Responsibility interaction on the measure of blame.

Third, it was expected that compensation would be utilized as a response to threat by participants in the likeable, low-responsibility condition. This careful volunteer victim could not easily be either derogated or blamed, so he was expected to be awarded more compensation than any of the other victims. Thus, we predicted a Likeability  $\times$  Responsibility interaction on the compensation measure.

Finally, we measured the strength of participants' beliefs in a just world. We expected that all of the predicted effects would be more robust among strong believers than among weak believers.

## Method

### *Participants*

Data for this experiment were collected from two separate samples, who completed the dependent measures in different orders, as explained in the procedure. The first sample consisted of 104 participants (60 female, 44 male), and the second sample consisted of 82 participants (55 female, 27 male). All participants were introductory psychology students at the University of Western Ontario, who participated in partial fulfillment of course requirements. For all analyses except those involving the Stroop task (which was administered only to the first sample), the full complement of 186 participants was included.

### *Materials*

The Belief in a Just World scale is a 20-item questionnaire that was developed by Rubin and Peplau (1975). Its purpose is to assess individual differences in the extent to which people believe that, in general, events in the world unfold in a manner that is fair and just. Participants rate on 6-point scales the degree to which they agree with positively (e.g., "Students almost always deserve the grades they receive in school") and negatively (e.g., "Good deeds often go unnoticed and unrewarded," reverse-coded) worded items.

In the present study, the scale yielded relatively low (but not atypical) internal reliability ( $\alpha = .53$ ). For purposes of statistical analyses, participants were classified as either strong or weak believers in a just world on the basis

of a median split. (Regression analyses treating scores on the Belief in a Just World scale as a continuous variable yielded identical results.)

The article given to participants took the form of a full-length newspaper story. There were four different versions of this article, each containing a unique combination of information about the likeability of the victim (likeable vs. unlikeable) and the responsibility of the victim for causing the accident (high vs. low). In order to make the article engaging, it contained quotes from the victim and people who knew the victim, as well as photos of the intersection where the accident was supposed to have taken place and of a local high school where the victim had either been a volunteer coach or had sold drugs to teens.

In a procedure similar to one used by Hafer (2000a), participants in the first sample were asked to complete a Stroop task on a computer. This task involved identifying the font colors (blue, red, green, or yellow) of strings of Xs on the screen. These strings masked words presented in gray below the threshold of consciousness. That is, a gray word was presented for 50 ms and was then replaced by a string of colored Xs. This subliminal technique was employed to prevent participants from explicitly connecting the Stroop task to the article. Of the 20 masked words, 10 were justice-related (e.g., “equal,” “fair”), and the other 10 words were irrelevant to justice (e.g., “muskrats,” “sugar”). The two word lists were equated for length and frequency of usage (see Hafer, 2000a).

To measure derogation, participants were asked the extent to which the victim was likeable in general and desirable to have as a friend, neighbor, or coworker (adapted from Lott & Lott, 1986). Participants also rated the victim on eight bipolar personality traits (e.g., considerate–inconsiderate, intelligent–unintelligent) that had been shown in past research to distinguish best between liked and disliked individuals (Lott, Lott, Reed, & Crowe, 1970). All of these ratings, which have been used in previous studies to assess perceptions of victims (e.g., Hafer, 2000b), were made on a 9-point scale. In the present study, the 12 items assessing perceptions of the victim’s likeability and character yielded high inter-item reliability ( $\alpha = .93$ ) and, therefore, were summed to form a composite measure of derogation.

To measure blame/responsibility, participants were asked to indicate on a 7-point scale the extent to which they believed that each of the victim and the perpetrator were to blame and were responsible for the accident. The two items related to the victim showed high inter-item reliability ( $\alpha = .94$ ) and, therefore, were summed to form a composite measure of blame.

The compensation measure asked participants to suggest how much money they felt the victim should be awarded from the driver’s insurance company in a civil trial. The question was open-ended, so participants were free to specify any amount.

*Procedure*

Except as noted, the procedure was identical for both samples. Participants were tested individually by one of two experimenters (one male and one female). When a student arrived for the study, the experimenter gave him or her a brief overview, explaining that the experiment would involve completing a "personality questionnaire," reading a news article and answering questions about its content, and completing a hand-eye coordination task on the computer. Participants were led to believe that the experimenter was interested in the relation between personality traits, reading comprehension, and hand-eye coordination.

After participants signed a consent form, the experimenter gave them the Belief in a Just World scale (Rubin & Peplau, 1975) to complete. Next, participants were given one of four versions of the article profiling the accident victim to read at their own pace and were told that they would be asked questions about the article later in the session.

Only participants in the first sample completed the Stroop task. Immediately after reading the article, these participants were seated in front of a computer. The experimenter said that the upcoming task assessed hand-eye coordination and was unrelated to the article they had read. Participants were told to focus on the center of the computer screen, where a string of colored Xs would appear. Their task would be to strike one of four keys (marked with colored stickers) that correspond to the color of the Xs as quickly and as accurately as possible. They also were told that words would be flashed very quickly on the screen before the Xs appeared, but that they should ignore these words.

Participants were given three practice trials before the actual test started. The critical word-mask pairings were then presented one at a time in random order, and the computer recorded people's response latencies. There was a total of 40 trials, with each word appearing in a word-mask pairing twice (once in the first 20 trials, and once in the second 20 trials).

Finally, all participants were given a short questionnaire containing the critical explicit measures of the likeability of the victim, the victim's and perpetrator's responsibility and blame, and the amount of money that should be awarded to the victim in a civil trial. Participants in the first sample completed these items in the order of derogation, blame, and compensation; whereas participants in the second sample completed the items in the reverse order (compensation, blame, and derogation). We counterbalanced the order of the questions across samples because utilizing one strategy to deal with threat (e.g., derogation) might obviate the use of subsequently measured strategies (e.g., blame). The questionnaire also contained two manipulation checks, which confirmed that participants had paid

attention to the content of the articles and had not perceived the Stroop words consciously. Participants were then debriefed, thanked for their participation, and dismissed.

## Results

### *Stroop Task*

Before analyzing the Stroop data, reaction times that were 3 standard deviations above the mean were excluded. Incorrect responses (i.e., trials in which a participant selected the wrong color) were omitted as well. The distributions of errors and outliers were fairly even across word type and color type. The Stroop data were analyzed using a 2 (Word Type)  $\times$  2 (Victim Character)  $\times$  2 (Victim Responsibility)  $\times$  2 (Dichotomized Belief in A Just World Scores) repeated-measures design, with word type as a within-subjects variable and the other three factors as between-subjects variables. Contrary to predictions, justice words did not cause significantly longer reaction time latencies ( $M = 614.15$  ms) than did nonjustice words ( $M = 608.15$  ms),  $F(1, 96) = 1.98$ , *ns*, although the difference was in the expected direction. There were also no main effects or interactions involving any of the between-subjects factors.

When the response latencies on the first and second sets of 20 trials were analyzed separately, however, the difference in latencies to justice and nonjustice words on the second set of 20 trials was significant,  $F(1, 100) = 5.91$ ,  $p < .05$ , with justice words ( $M = 588.92$ ) causing longer latencies, as predicted, than nonjustice words ( $M = 574.72$ ). As in the analysis of the full set of trials, there were no significant between-condition differences in reaction times to the justice or nonjustice words in the second set of 20 trials. Perhaps the three practice trials given to participants before the first set of trials were not enough to familiarize them with the task, which might have contaminated the first set of 20 trials.

### *Explicit Measures*

A  $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$  MANOVA (with victim's responsibility, victim's likeability, order of the dependent measures, and dichotomized BJW scores as independent variables) was performed on the three principal dependent measures (derogation, blame, and compensation). As predicted, the multivariate effects were significant for victim likeability,  $F(3, 167) = 111.03$ ,  $p < .001$ ; victim responsibility,  $F(3, 167) = 100.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and the interaction between likeability and responsibility,  $F(3, 167) = 5.68$ ,  $p < .01$ . In contrast, there were no significant effects (main effect or interactions) for the order of

Table 1

*Means for Primary Dependent Measures as a Function of Victim's Likeability and Responsibility*

Likeability and responsibility	Derogation <sup>a</sup>		Blame/responsibility <sup>b</sup>		Compensation	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Volunteer						
Low responsibility ( <i>n</i> = 46)	75.51 <sub>a</sub>	10.82	3.52 <sub>d</sub>	2.09	\$1,612,968 <sub>g</sub>	\$2,596,305
High responsibility ( <i>n</i> = 46)	71.46 <sub>a</sub>	12.03	10.70 <sub>e</sub>	2.37	\$149,868 <sub>h</sub>	\$232,451
Drug dealer						
Low responsibility ( <i>n</i> = 46)	42.96 <sub>b</sub>	10.58	2.91 <sub>d</sub>	1.50	\$262,500 <sub>h</sub>	\$337,984
High responsibility ( <i>n</i> = 48)	47.71 <sub>c</sub>	12.25	9.12 <sub>f</sub>	3.68	\$95,633 <sub>h</sub>	\$198,196

*Note.* Compensation amounts are rounded to the nearest dollar. Means with different subscripts within each column differ significantly. <sup>a</sup>Lower scores indicate less favorable ratings; midpoint = 56. <sup>b</sup>Midpoint = 7.

the dependent measures. Thus, participants' responses to the derogation, blame, and compensation items were not influenced by the order in which they were obtained. Also, there were no significant effects (main effect or interactions) for BJW.

To determine which specific measures yielded significant effects, univariate 2 (Likeability)  $\times$  2 (Responsibility) ANOVAs were conducted on the three dependent measures separately. Table 1 presents the cell means on each measure.<sup>3</sup>

For the derogation measure, there was a significant main effect for victim likeability,  $F(1, 181) = 279.26$ ,  $p < .001$ . As predicted, the volunteer ( $M = 73.46$ ) was rated more favorably than the drug dealer ( $M = 45.38$ ). Thus, the drug-dealer victim was derogated relative to the likeable victim.

<sup>3</sup>Pooled within-cell correlations between each of the three principal dependent variables were calculated. Across all participants, blame was correlated positively with derogation ( $r = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ ), blame was correlated negatively with compensation ( $r = -.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and the correlation between derogation and compensation was not significant ( $r = -.16$ , *ns*).

Although this main effect was very strong, there was also a significant interaction between likeability and responsibility,  $F(1, 181) = 6.84, p = .01$ . A Newman-Keuls comparison shows that, as predicted, the low-responsibility drug dealer was derogated even more than was the high-responsibility drug dealer,  $q(2, 181) = 2.84, p < .05$  (see Table 1).

For the blame measure, there was a significant main effect for behavioral responsibility,  $F(1, 182) = 318.97, p < .001$ ; which shows that, as predicted, the careless victim was blamed more ( $M = 9.89$ ) than was the careful victim ( $M = 3.22$ ). Interestingly, there was also a significant main effect for victim likeability,  $F(1, 182) = 8.46, p < .01$ . The volunteer victim was rated as being more blameworthy or behaviorally responsible for the accident ( $M = 7.11$ ) than was the drug-dealer victim ( $M = 6.09$ ). The predicted interaction between likeability and responsibility failed to reach significance,  $F(1, 182) = 1.65, ns$ ; but, in line with the hypotheses, the careless volunteer was blamed more than was any other victim (see Table 1). Importantly, a Newman-Keuls comparison reveals that the careless volunteer victim was blamed significantly more for his injuries than was the careless drug-dealer victim,  $q(2, 182) = 4.21, p < .01$ , despite the greater likeability of the volunteer victim.

For the monetary compensation dependent variable, there was a significant main effect for responsibility, reflecting that the careful victim was awarded a substantially higher amount ( $M = \$937,734$ ) than was the careless victim ( $M = \$122,148$ ),  $F(1, 174) = 17.20, p < .001$ . This main effect was qualified by the predicted interaction between behavioral responsibility and likeability,  $F(1, 174) = 10.88, p < .001$ . Newman-Keuls comparisons reveal exactly the predicted pattern: The careful volunteer victim was compensated significantly more than were the victims in the other three conditions (see Table 1).

### *Individual Differences in Belief in a Just World*

Although no effects involving individual differences in BJW were significant in the MANOVA, the three-way interaction between BJW, likeability, and responsibility approached significance on the compensation measure in a univariate ANOVA,  $F(1, 170) = 2.25, p < .16$ . Because we had expected effects for BJW, we examined this interaction for exploratory purposes. The means for the interaction are displayed in Figure 1.

Newman-Keuls comparisons reveal an interesting pattern: Strong just-world believers in the low-responsibility, volunteer victim condition awarded significantly more money than did any other group, including (most importantly) weak just-world believers in the same condition,  $q(2, 170) = 3.02, p < .05$ . This difference suggests that the suffering of the

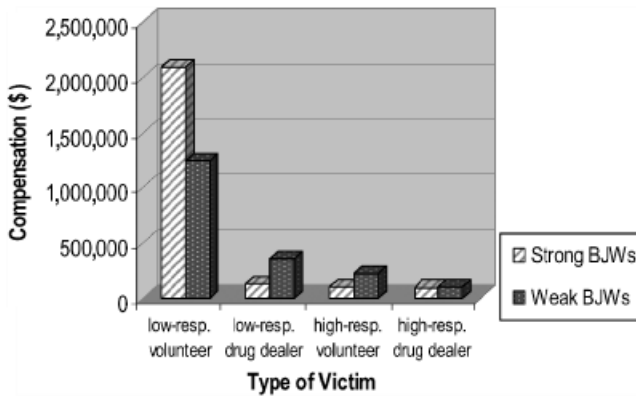


Figure 1. Monetary compensation to the four types of victim as a function of strength of just-world beliefs. BJW = belief in a just world.

careful volunteer victim elicited more extreme defensive reactions from strong believers in a just world than from weak believers. Of course, these results must be interpreted with caution, given the nonsignificance of the interaction.

## Discussion

Several interesting findings emerged in the present study. Most importantly, the pattern of results suggests that people use different strategies for protecting their just-world beliefs, depending on critical aspects of the victim (e.g., character, behavior). When victims are undesirable or unattractive, it is possible to derogate their worth, which protects BJW because bad people deserve to suffer. This is what appears to have occurred for participants who read the version of the story with the drug dealer: His likeability ratings (despite a quote from him in the article that he was a misunderstood person trying to turn his life around) were well below the midpoint. Of course, unfavorable ratings of the drug dealer would have occurred to some extent, even in the absence of suffering (threat), but evidence that derogation was at least partly defensive came from the significant interaction of likeability and responsibility. This interaction showed that the low-responsibility drug dealer was derogated significantly more than was the high-responsibility drug dealer, presumably because blame provided a second way to protect just-world beliefs in the latter condition.

When a victim of a tragic misfortune is likeable, the threat to just-world beliefs must be handled differently. In the present study, because it was not

possible (without major cognitive distortions) to derogate the character of the likeable volunteer victim, participants protected their just-world beliefs by either blaming him (in the high-responsibility condition) or by compensating him (in the low-responsibility condition). When there was a salient behavioral cause of the accident, people were quick to attribute the accident to this cause (in this case, failing to look both ways before crossing the street at night). The assumption that blame was at least partly defensive was supported by the finding that the likeable high-responsibility victim was actually blamed significantly more than was the unlikeable high-responsibility victim, despite the former individual's greater virtue, presumably because derogation also was used to some extent to reduce threat in the latter case.

When there was no salient behavioral cause of a good person's victimization, participants' just-world beliefs could not be protected by either derogation or blame. In the absence of these options, the opportunity to compensate the victim was embraced with enthusiasm. The low-responsibility volunteer victim was awarded huge amounts of money (over \$1.5 million, on average). This amount seems especially large, in comparison with the average amount awarded to the high-responsibility volunteer victim (just under \$150,000). It appears that holding the likeable, but careless victim responsible for his injuries was sufficient to protect just-world beliefs, deeming it unnecessary (and both psychologically and behaviorally inconsistent) to provide him with sizable compensation. Despite being more likeable than the high- and low-responsibility drug-dealer victims, the high-responsibility volunteer victim was not awarded significantly more compensation.

The order in which participants completed the dependent measures did not influence the results. For instance, whether the compensation measure was completed before or after the derogation and blame measures did not affect the pattern of findings significantly. Thus, the results appear to reflect differences across conditions in the chosen mode of protecting just-world beliefs, rather than differences in whatever strategy was first available.

The strength of participants' BJW generally did not influence the magnitude of their responses on the dependent measures. The one exception to this rule was compensation of the victim. Strong believers in a just world proposed huge awards for the low-responsibility volunteer victim (more than \$2,000,000, on average), almost double the average award suggested for the same victim by weak believers in a just world. This finding suggests that the likeable low-responsibility victim was more threatening to strong believers than to weak believers, but the difference must be interpreted cautiously because the relevant three-way interaction was not statistically significant.

On the modified Stroop task, it was predicted that slower response latencies to naming colors would occur following justice-related words than nonjustice-related words. This pattern did appear, but only in the second set of trials. Perhaps participants needed to orient themselves to the task before it reflected the postulated process. The results on the second set of trials are consistent with the assumption that the accident scenarios posed a threat to participants' just-world beliefs. An alternative possibility is that reading the newspaper article made justice issues salient to all participants, as opposed to actually threatening their just-world beliefs. Although we cannot rule out this possibility unequivocally, the findings on the measures of derogation, blame, and compensation indicate that participants' beliefs in a just world were, indeed, threatened.

We have interpreted our findings as reflecting differences between conditions in chosen strategies for dealing with a threat to belief in a just world. That is, we have assumed that participants' just-world beliefs were threatened in all conditions when they read about the accident, and their responses to the dependent measures reflected how they protected their threatened beliefs (based on the victim's likeability and responsibility). It could be argued, instead, that the various conditions differed in the degree of threat to just-world beliefs. For instance, victimization of the drug dealer may have been less threatening than victimization of the volunteer. This issue is not restricted to the current study, but rather reflects a general ambiguity about manipulations in the BJW literature.

There are two reasons why we consider the assumption that just-world beliefs were threatened in all conditions to be plausible. First, the information about the victim's character and responsibility was presented after participants had read about his intense suffering. Thus, prior to learning anything about the victim's character or behavior, the threat was equal across all conditions. Second, the significant difference in latencies on the Stroop task for justice and nonjustice words on the second set of trials, together with the absence of latency differences between conditions, suggests that all participants experienced some, and relatively equal, threat to their just-world beliefs. Nevertheless, it would be useful for future researchers to disentangle more precisely the degree of threat from strategies for reducing threat.

We should acknowledge another limitation of the present study. We used vignettes to threaten participants' just-world beliefs, asking them to read an alleged newspaper article about an accident victim. Although participants were told that the newspaper article was real (and they appeared to believe so), the methodology is unlikely to have aroused extremely strong motivation. Future researchers should examine these issues using higher impact or more involving stimulus materials.

In closing, we often are confronted with other people's suffering, and the way we react to these situations has both practical and theoretical significance. The present research builds on Lerner's (1970) just-world theory by suggesting that an individual's chosen strategy for reaffirming threatened just-world beliefs will vary depending on such factors as the victim's character and responsibility. In an ideal world, all suffering victims would be offered help, but the results of this experiment suggest that helping is most likely to occur when a victim is likeable and (unambiguously) not responsible for his or her misfortune.

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