

LAY CAUSAL PERCEPTIONS OF THIRD WORLD POVERTY AND THE JUST WORLD THEORY¹

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This study investigated the factor analytic properties of Rubin and Peplau's (1975) Just World Scale and a questionnaire of possible causes of Third World poverty. Three Just World factors emerged in contrast to Hyland and Dann's (1987) four factor solution. They were interpreted as 'Pro Just World', 'Anti Just World' and 'Cynical or Reserved Just World Belief'. Four poverty factors emerged, interpreted as 'Blame the Poor', 'Blame Third World Governments', 'Blame Nature' and 'Blame Exploitation'. The most important finding to emerge was that only the 'Pro Just World' factor and significantly correlated with blaming the poor. Blaming the poor was significantly correlated with blaming Third World governments.

Rubin and Peplau's (1975) Just World Scale (JWS) has been widely used to investigate differences in the strength to which individuals believe in a just world, following the theorising of Lerner (1980). Investigators have reported that this scale is multi-dimensional (Fink and Wilkins, 1976; Ahmed and Stewart, 1985; Connors and Heaven, 1987; Hyland and Dann, 1987) although each of these studies has reported different factor structures. This variability in JWS factor structure might be due to subject sample characteristics, since all of the studies have been carried out in different countries and all have used

¹ The authors acknowledge the help of the late Jim Harper without whom this study could not have been carried out.

students as subjects, although Ahmed and Stewart (1985) included a sub-sample of older part-time students. The aims of this study were to attempt to replicate the results of a previous factor analytic study of the JWS in the U.K. (Hyland and Dann, 1987) using a different subject sample, and to examine whether political preference and causal perceptions of poverty were associated with components of the JWS rather than with JWS totals.

METHOD

SAMPLES

The JWS sample included 138 subjects (aged 17-72) of whom only 26 were students. Data from 89 of these subjects (aged 18-72) were used in the investigation of the Causes of Third World Poverty Scale.

MATERIALS

The JWS as it appears in Lerner (1980) was used. Minor wording changes were made to avoid gender bias. An 18 item Causes of Third World Poverty Scale was prepared for this study. This was similar to the questionnaire used by Feagin (1972) in his study and contained items like 'There is poverty in Third World countries because their governments are corrupt'. Items were rated on a 5 point scale (5 = Strongly agree, 1 = Strongly disagree). In addition subjects rated their political preference on a 5 point scale (1 = Left wing, 5 = Right wing).

RESULTS

A principal components analysis with Varimax rotation was performed on the data producing a 3 factor solution accounting for 34.8% of the total variance and the factors were compared with Hyland and Dann's (1987) using the Burt-Tucker co-efficient of congruence. None of the factors was identical. The first factor, labelled 'Pro Just World', loaded uniquely on 7 items like 'People who meet with misfortune have often brought it on themselves'. The second factor, labelled 'Anti Just World', loaded uniquely on 5 items like 'Many people suffer through absolutely no fault of their own'. The third factor loaded uniquely on 3 unjust and 1 just item which could indicate a self-serving cynicism or a reserved belief in a just world. A similar analysis was carried out on the Causes of Third World Poverty data producing a four factor solution accounting for 56.1% of the variance. The first factor, labelled 'Blame the Poor', loaded uniquely on 7 items attributing poverty to dispositional factors like 'The population of such countries make no attempt at self-improvement'. The second factor, labelled 'Blame Third World Governments', loaded uniquely on 3 items like 'Their governments are corrupt'. The third factor, labelled 'Blame Nature' loaded uniquely on only 1 item ('Their land is not suitable for agriculture'). The

fourth factor, labelled 'Blame exploitation', loaded uniquely on 2 items like 'The world economy and banking systems are loaded against the poor', blaming poverty on exploitation by other powers. The factor structure appeared to be broadly similar to previous findings (e.g. Furnham, 1982). Only the 'Pro Just World' component of the JWS was significantly correlated with blaming the poor (0.31; $n = 77$; $p < 0.003$). Blaming the poor was significantly correlated with blaming Third World governments (0.35; $n = 77$; $p < 0.001$). Political preference was not related to any of the Just World factors. No significant gender differences were found.

DISCUSSION

This study appears to support Hyland and Dann's (1987) suggestion that variables previously reported to be related to Just World belief may be related only to particular components of the JWS. The JWS factor structure reported here is unlike previously reported structures and serves as a reminder that a factor structure is not always good evidence of an underlying theoretically meaningful structure. Thus there is a need to evaluate the utility of the JWS. One problem is that contextual influences are not taken into account i.e. JWS studies fail to consider why subjects make Just World-type responses. The same criticism can be made of research into causal attributions of poverty. Discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) might be a more fruitful avenue of inquiry providing information on the conditions necessary for and contextual influences upon Just World-type linguistic repertoires.

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