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Are victims also judged more positively if they say their lives are just?

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Abstract: Non-victims who express high versus low personal belief in a just world (PBJW) are judged as having more social value, both social utility (i.e., market value) and social desirability (i.e., affective value). Our goal was to test whether this pattern differed when the targets were presented as innocent or non-innocent victims of enduring suffering. A hundred and eighty-six participants of both sexes took part in our 2 (degree of PBJW expressed: high/low) X 3 (Target identity: innocent victim/ non-innocent victim/ non-victim) between-subjects experimental study. Participants rated the targets on four measures: positive/negative social utility/desirability. Targets were judged more positively and less negatively if they expressed high versus low PBJW, regardless of their being non-victims or (non-)innocent victims. This pattern is taken as further evidence that the expression of high PBJW is a judgment norm, that is, a socially valued discourse irrespective of it being true or untrue.

Keywords: Personal belief in a just world; Social value; Social utility; Social desirability; Victims.

Será que as vítimas também são julgadas mais positivamente se disserem que as suas vidas são justas? Alvos apresentados como não-vítimas e que exprimem uma crença num mundo pessoal justo (CMJ pessoal) alta versus baixa são julgados como tendo mais valor social, tanto utilidade social (i.e., valor de mercado) como desejabilidade social (i.e., valor afetivo). O nosso objetivo foi testar se este padrão difere quando os alvos são apresentados como vítimas inocentes ou não inocentes de sofrimento prolongado. Cento e oitenta e seis indivíduos de ambos os sexos participaram num estudo experimental inter-participantes 2 (grau de CMJ pessoal expressa: alta/baixa) X 3 (identidade dos alvos: vítima inocente/ vítima não inocente/ não vítima). Os/as participantes avaliaram os alvos em quatro medidas: utilidade social positiva e negativa e desejabilidade social positiva e negativa. Os alvos foram avaliados mais positivamente e menos negativamente se exprimiram CMJ pessoal alta versus baixa, independentemente de serem vítimas (não) inocentes ou não vítimas. Interpretamos este padrão como representando mais evidência de que a expressão de CMJ pessoal constitui uma norma de julgamento, isto é, um discurso valorizado socialmente, independentemente de ser ou não verdadeiro.

Palavras-chave: Crença num mundo pessoal justo; Valor social; Utilidade social; Desejabilidade social; Vítimas.

In a globalized world such as ours, where people have permanent access to information, individuals are exposed to numerous examples of injustice. Furthermore, they themselves have most likely been targets of injustice. Surprisingly, individuals are supposed to say the world is just, especially when they refer to their lives. Indeed, research has found that individuals who say their lives are just (e.g., "I generally get what I deserve.") are evaluated more positively than those who display the opposite discourse (e.g., "I rarely get what I deserve."; Alves & Correia, 2008, 2010a; Testé & Perrin, 2013). The expression of high versus low personal belief in a just world (PBJW; Dalbert, 1999) is thus a more socially valued discourse. Nevertheless, in most studies on the social value of PBJW, targets who say their lives are (un)just are simply presented as university students. Is high versus low PBJW also more socially valued when other categories of individuals express that idea?

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In the study we report here our main goal was to test whether the social value of high versus low PBJW is resistant to strong evidence that the world is not just for the target. If that is the case, we will have further evidence regarding the strength of PBJW social value. On the contrary, if there is one category of people to whom affirming versus denying justice for themselves is ill-suited, we will have obtained first-hand evidence regarding the limits of high PBJW social value. We thus manipulated the identity of the targets who say their lives are generally versus rarely just by using central categories in just-world theory (Lerner, 1980) - innocent and non-innocent victims. Furthermore, we also presented non-victims displaying the same discourses. The non-victims category allowed us to replicate previous research and to compare the social value of PBJW they express with that expressed by innocent and non-innocent victims.

The Belief in a Just World as a Motivation and as a Discourse

Just-world theory (Lerner, 1980) has focused on the “BJW” as motivation. Its main assumption is that individuals need to perceive the world as a just place where people, themselves included, get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Such need motivates individuals to unconsciously perceive the world as a just place and to behave and reason in that fashion (Callan, Sutton, Harvey, & Dawtry, 2014; Lerner, 1980). Indeed, research has shown that observers often derogate or/and blame victims. These reactions occur primarily towards victims who are objectively responsible for their plight (or “non-innocent victims”). Surprisingly, victims who are *not* responsible for their plight (or “innocent victims”) are also derogated or/and blamed (e.g., Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2001), albeit to a lesser extent than non-innocent victims, for they pose a threat to people’s BJW (Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2007). Innocent victims are paradoxically more derogated/blamed by individuals who are chronically (i.e., “high believers in a just world”) or situationally more concerned about justice (e.g., through priming). This occurs especially when innocent victims are closer to the observers’ world and their suffering cannot be relieved (e.g., Correia et al., 2012; Correia & Vala, 2003).

A recent line of research, however, has focused on studying the BJW as a discourse. Its main assumption is that the expression of BJW is a more socially than individually motivated discourse (Alves, 2012). According to this approach, individuals are expected to state the world is just rather than unjust, especially in contexts where the notion of individual merit is central (e.g., schools, companies). In those contexts at least, the “world is generally just” discourse has become prescriptive. The prescriptive aspect of the “world is generally just” discourse does not derive from it being necessarily truer than the “world is generally unjust” discourse. Instead, its prescriptive aspect derives from the fact that it contributes to the legitimation of the evaluative practices in those contexts (e.g., to fail or pass students; to promote or dismiss workers). In this respect, the “just world discourse” is a “judgment norm” (Dubois, 2005). Individuals who evaluate others in those contexts thus expect them to express that idea whether or not it reflects reality. In turn, those who are evaluated learn that such discourse has social value. This social value is stronger, however, when individuals are referring to their lives rather than to the lives of people in general (Alves & Correia, 2010a,b). Indeed, Testé and Perrin (2013) characterized the expression of the idea that the world is just for people in general as normatively ambivalent. That is why in this study we have focused on the social value of high (versus low) PBJW - e.g., “I generally [rarely] get what I deserve” - rather than on the social value of high (versus low) general BJW (Dalbert, Montada, & Schmitt, 1987) - e.g., “People generally [rarely] get what they deserve”.

Social value comprises two evaluative dimensions (Beauvois, 1995): social utility and social desirability. Whereas social utility indicates the market value of an object, social desirability indicates its affective value (Beauvois & Dépret, 2008; Cambon, 2006). Either dimension of social value can be positive or negative. Positive social utility refers to the characteristics leading to success in contexts and societies based on individualism and meritocracy (e.g., entrepreneurial, ambitious), and negative social utility comprises the characteristics that are detrimental to success (e.g., passive, unambitious). Positive social desirability refers to the characteristics that make an object socially attractive (e.g., warm, kind), and negative social desirability comprises the characteristics that make an object socially unattractive (e.g., aloof, unkind).

Several studies have consistently found that individuals expressing high PBJW (i.e., a justice-affirming discourse about the self) are more socially valued than those who express low PBJW (i.e., a justice-denying discourse about the self). Specifically, bogus university students who expressed high versus low PBJW were judged as more socially useful and desirable (Alves & Correia, 2010a; Testé, Maisonnette, Assilaméhou, & Perrin, 2012; Testé & Perrin, 2013; see also Alves & Correia, 2013). Furthermore, individuals used higher scores of PBJW to convey general and specific positive (versus negative) images of themselves (Alves & Correia, 2008, 2010b). These patterns led Alves and Correia (2010a) to regard the expression of PBJW as judgment norms, that is, as socially valued statements

irrespective of their being true or false (Dubois, 2000, 2005). In fact, Alves and Correia (2010a) found that the expression of high versus low PBJW was more approved of. Yet, the two discourses were judged as equally untrue.

Limitations of Past Research and Overview of the Current Study

Despite the valuable insights the aforementioned lines of research have offered to our understanding of social life, they have been conducted separately. To our knowledge at least, most research on the social value of PBJW expression has used targets simply presented as university students (e.g., Alves & Correia, 2010a; for an exception, see Testé et al., 2012). Thus, these targets have most probably been perceived as non-victims. In our study we intended to expand on these findings by also using victims as targets who say their lives are generally versus rarely just. In our view, this has interesting implications.

Indeed, being a victim is an aversive identity and, in specific cases, it is even a stigma. For instance, Goffman (1963/1990) included disfigurement and physical disability in the category of “abominations of the body”. People usually avoid these categories of victims and perceive them as relatively useless (see also Stangor & Crandall, 2003). Hence, the judged social value of these victims is low. Nevertheless, consistent with “the social norm of victim’s objective evaluation” (Correia & Vala, 2003, p. 383), research also suggests that the social value of victims may vary according to their responsibility for their situation. Specifically, Alves and Correia (2009, 2013) found that individuals approved more of supportive reactions towards a disfigured and physically disabled victim, if they were presented as innocent rather than non-innocent. As we interpret these results, even though the social value of (physically) stigmatized people is low on the whole (Goffman, 1963/1990), it is even lower if they are (versus are not) responsible for their stigma. In other words, the social value of non-innocent victims is lower than that of innocent victims. It is thus possible that the social value of the targets may moderate the attributed social value of their discourses on personal (in)justice. Nevertheless, to our knowledge, research on the expression of PBJW has not manipulated the identity of the targets.

As in previous research, some participants in our study read that the targets were average university students (i.e., non-victims). Other participants read that the targets were university students who had had a road accident resulting in very serious and permanent suffering (disfigurement and physical disabilities). The victims were presented as either responsible or not responsible for the accident (i.e., non-innocent or innocent victims, respectively). We then asked participants to rate the targets on social utility and social desirability. This strategy allowed us to ascertain whether the notion of a just world for oneself is a socially valued discourse when both non-victims (as in prior research) and victims express it. This strategy also allowed us to test whether the social value of PBJW depends on the fact that the victims are presented as innocent or non-innocent.

We believe this is an important step towards a broader understanding of the PBJW social value. In fact, if we find that individuals expect both victims and non-victims to express high PBJW, we will have gathered further (and counter-intuitive) evidence regarding the strength of its social value. This will be especially true if there are no differences between the innocent and the non-innocent victims. On the contrary, if we find that the expression of PBJW is expected differently for victims and non-victims and/or between innocent and non-innocent victims, we will have identified a boundary condition for its social value.

Hypotheses

Reflecting the social value of PBJW, we expected that the targets who expressed high versus low PBJW would be judged more positively² (main effect of PBJW expressed; H1); Reflecting the different social value of the targets, we expected the non-victims would be judged more positively than the innocent victims and these would be judged more positively than the non-innocent victims (main effect of target identity, H2); We also expected an interaction effect between PBJW expressed and target identity. Nevertheless, there are three possible (and mutually exclusive) groups of predictions for the interaction.

Focusing on the victimized targets, the patterns of this interaction depend on the weight, which we could not predict *a priori*, that participants gave to three different factors: victim suffering, the degree of PBJW they expressed, or/and their innocence. If participants focused on the fact that these targets *suffer very much*, it is likely that their judgments reflected a compassionate “no one deserves such fate” reasoning. If that were the case, we should expect both the innocent and the non-innocent victims to be judged more positively when they expressed low versus high PBJW (contrary to the non-victims) (H3). If

² For the sake of brevity, in the hypotheses we use the phrase “more positively judged”. Given that there are positive and negative dimensions of social value, that phrase should be understood as “more positively judged on the positive dimensions of social value and less negatively judged on the negative dimensions of social value”.

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participants focused on *what the targets said*, we should expect their judgments to reflect the social value of PBJW. In this case, we expected both the innocent and the non-innocent victims to be judged more positively when they expressed high versus low PBJW (but less so than their non-victim counterparts because of their higher social value; H4). If participants took into account *not only what the targets said but also whether they are innocent or non-innocent* (thus, being judged as less or more deserving of suffering, respectively), we should expect: the innocent victim expressing low versus high PBJW to be judged more positively (H5.1); the non-innocent victim expressing high versus low PBJW to be judged more positively (H5.2); the innocent victim expressing high PBJW to be judged as negatively as the non-innocent victim expressing low PBJW (H5.3); the innocent victim expressing low PBJW to be judged as positively as the non-innocent victim expressing high PBJW (H5.4). Note that if our results support Hypotheses 5.1 - 5.4, they will indicate that participants based their judgments not on the social value of PBJW, but on perceived “truth”, that is, on the match between victim responsibility and how just or unjust the victims judge their situation. As a result, if these hypotheses receive support, we will have identified an example showing that the expression of high PBJW is not always valued³.

METHOD

Participants

Our sample comprises 186 university students of both sexes (116 females, 70 males) studying in Lisbon (Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologia, Faculdade de Direito, Faculdade de Letras, Instituto Superior de Economia e Gestão). Their ages ranged between 18 and 37 ($M = 21.12$, $SD = 2.29$).

Procedure

The experimenters approached potential participants and invited them to take part in the study. After agreeing to participate, the experimenters handed them an informed consent form. Participants read the study was about people perception and would take them between 10 to 15 minutes to complete. It also stressed that their participation was voluntary and their responses would remain anonymous. After signing the consent form, they were handed a block of stapled sheets of paper.

On the first page they were thanked for participating, read how the study would be conducted and indicated their age and sex. Next, they read a text which manipulated the non-victim or the victim conditions. It was followed by another text which manipulated the expression of PBJW. Then, participants answered the manipulation checks. Afterwards, they rated the target on adjectives which operationalized the positive and negative dimensions of social value. Finally, participants were given another sheet of paper which debriefed them about the goals of the study.

Independent variables

This experimental study has a 2 (degree of expressed PBJW: high/ low) X 3 (target identity: non-victim/ innocent victim/ non-innocent victim) between-participants design. These variables were manipulated through texts which were distributed randomly among participants.

Expressed PBJW was manipulated as in Alves and Correia (2010a). The text comprised three excerpts from a bogus 50-minute interview with the target. In fact, the sentences were simply the items of Dalbert (1999) PBJW scale to which several expressions were added to emulate oral speech. An example of expressed high [low] PBJW was: “(minute 8): “I think that I generally [rarely] get what I deserve: overall, events in my life are [not] just... That’s it: I believe that most of the things that happen in my life are [not] fair, that I usually [rarely] deserve what happens to me.” (. . .).”

As far as the targets are concerned, two were presented as victims and one as a non-victim. Victim innocence and non-innocence were operationalized as in Alves and Correia (2009, 2013). In the *innocent condition* participants read that the victim had been driving carefully and at low speed, but they⁴ lost control of the car due to spilt oil on the road. In the *non-innocent condition*, participants read the victim

³ As one anonymous reviewer pointed out, from a motivational point of view we could expect different patterns for these hypotheses. In this view both the innocent victim and the expression of low PBJW represent threats to individuals’ BJW. As a strategy to restore their BJW, and contrary to our hypotheses, participants could thus be expected to judge the innocent victim who expresses low PBJW more negatively than the other victims. Nevertheless, we think this possibility would be more likely if the victims had expressed low general BJW. In our reasoning, such discourse would more strongly remind the participants that their world can also be unjust and that they themselves can also be victims of injustice. We are not saying this could not occur with the expression of low PBJW, but that it seems more likely with the expression of low GBW. If the mere expression of low GBW is indeed threatening to individuals’ “fundamental delusion” (Lerner, 1980), we could also predict that this pattern would be stronger among high versus low believers in a just world, or among those experiencing an emotionally arousing situation.

⁴ In English it is possible to use “they”, “their” or “them” to refer to just one person in order to avoid “he/she”, “his/her”, or “him/her”. These double references were used in our study (e.g., “ele/ela”) because there is no equivalent linguistic device in Portuguese.

had been driving drunk, recklessly and at high speed. As a result, the victim lost control of the car while taking a turn. In both victim innocence conditions, participants read that the car fell off a cliff and the consequences for the victims were presented as very serious and permanent (e.g., 85% of the body burnt, disfigurement, no eyelids, need of constant eye lubrication, need of permanent medical care for their whole life). Participants also read that the victims self-described as typical university students before the accident. In the *non-victim condition* participants read a text about the daily routine of a young person who self-described as a typical university student. The information provided comprised their study and eating habits, their hobbies and the means of transportation they used to go to university. In all three conditions the targets were referred to as "X". The word "victim" was never used in the texts and no sociodemographic information about them was provided.

Manipulation Checks

We checked whether our degree of PBJW expressed and victim innocence manipulations were perceived as intended and whether the three targets were judged as suffering to different extents. Participants thus read that it was important for us to know whether the texts were clearly written. For that purpose, we asked them to answer to nine items (seven for the participants in the non-victim conditions). They read: "Thus, based on what you have just read, which you can reread if you so wish, you think that: (please, answer by using the numbers from 1 to 7)".

Degree of PBJW expressed (two items; $r = .78, p < .001$). "X said they rarely deserve what happens to them - X said they generally deserve what happens to them"; "X said their life is rarely just - X said their life is generally just".

Victim innocence (two items; $r = .87, p < .001$). "X is not guilty of what happened to them - X is very much guilty of what happened to them"; "X is not responsible for what happened to them - X is very much responsible for what happened to them". Only participants in the victim conditions answered to these items.

Target suffering (five items; $\alpha = .85$). "X lives an unserious situation - X lives a very serious situation"; "X does not suffer physically at all - X suffers a lot physically"; "X does not suffer psychologically at all - X suffers a lot psychologically"; "X is not a victim at all - X is very much a victim"; "X's life is very much similar to the life of a typical university student - X's life is not similar at all to the life of a typical university student" (reverse coded). We ran an exploratory factorial analysis with Varimax rotation and listwise deletion. It indicated three factors with eigenvalues > 1 accounting for 78.72% of variance. The factor structure reflected the aforementioned distribution of items. We thus computed scores within each construct by averaging across items, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of the construct.

Dependent Variables

The participants rated the targets on 23 adjectives by indicating how much they agreed the adjectives characterized the targets on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = I don't agree at all; 7 = I agree very much)⁵.

Positive social utility (four items; $\alpha = .75$). "Independent" ("independente"); "competitive" ("competitivo/a"); "hard-working" (trabalhador/a); "competent" ("competente").

Positive Social desirability (four items; $\alpha = .78$). "Tolerant" ("tolerante"); "polite" ("educado"); "nice" ("simpático/a"); "sincere" ("sincero/a").

Negative social utility (six items; $\alpha = .86$). "Selfish" (egoísta); "immature" ("imatur/a"); "inconscient" ("unconscientious"); "irresponsible" ("irresponsável"); "lazy" (preguiçoso/a).

⁵ In order to decide which adjectives to use in the study, we first asked 24 pre-testers to read our scenarios (four pre-testers by scenario) and to characterise the targets with up to 10 adjectives. Because we felt difficulty in categorizing various positive adjectives as social utility or social desirability ones, we decided to use those in Alves and Correia (2008, 2010a) and to add the negative ones suggested by pre-testers. We added five adjectives for exploratory purposes only - "emotional" ("emotivo/a"), "optimistic" ("otimista"), "rational" ("racional"), "realistic" ("realista"), "useful" ("útil") - but they were not taken into account in the analyses. Participants thus judged the targets by rating them on 33 adjectives but we only analysed 28. An exploratory factorial analysis with Varimax rotation indicated five factors with eigenvalues > 1 accounting for 59.79% of the variance. After conducting the factorial analysis, we excluded five other adjectives. Two of them, "looney" ("alucinado") and "nutcase" ("avariado"), were excluded because they alone comprised Factor 5. The remaining three - "resigned" ("conformado"), "determined" ("determinado") and "intelligent" ("inteligente") - were excluded because they had similar loadings on two factors. We then reran the analyses without these five adjectives and got a four-factor solution explaining 65.77% of the variance.

Negative social desirability (nine items; $\alpha = .93$). "Annoyed" ("chateado/a"); "depressed" ("deprimido/a"); "unhappy" ("infeliz"); "insecure" ("inseguro/a"); "whiny" ("queixoso/a"); "sad" ("triste"); "angry" ("zangado/a"); "good-humoured" ("bem-humorado/a"); "confident" ("confiante")⁶.

We computed scores within each construct by averaging across items, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of the construct. We should note that in most research only adjectives with positive valence have been used (Alves & Correia, 2008, 2010a, 2013). Although Testé and Perrin (2013) used adjectives with negative valence, they reversed them and created only two indices: one of social utility and another of social desirability. We decided to create four indices because they reflect the factorial analysis that we conducted (see footnote 4). Furthermore, these indices allowed us to explore whether there were different patterns between the negative and the positive dimensions of social value.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

In order to check whether participants understood PBJW expression, victim innocence and suffering (and lack thereof of the non-victim) as intended, we ran two 2 (degree of expressed PBJW: high/low) X 3 (target identity: innocent victim/non-innocent victim/non-victim) ANOVAs on degree of PBJW expressed and target suffering. We also ran a 2 (degree of expressed PBJW: high/low) X 2 (target identity: innocent victim/non-innocent victim) on victim innocence.

As far as PBJW expression is concerned, there was only a significant effect of expressed PBJW, such that the targets who expressed high PBJW were judged as having said their lives were more just ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 1.47$) than targets who expressed low PBJW ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 1.33$), $F(1, 180) = 418.91$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .70$.

In respect to victim innocence, the victims presented as innocent were judged as less responsible for/guilty of their situation ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.36$) than the victims presented as non-innocent ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.82$), $F(1, 121) = 137.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .53$. There was also a significant, albeit much weaker, effect of expressed PBJW, such that the victims who expressed high PBJW were judged as more responsible/guilty ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 2.42$) than victims who expressed low PBJW ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 2.16$), $F(1, 121) = 4.87$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2_p = .04$.

Finally, as regards suffering, the non-victims were judged as suffering less ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.96$) than both the innocent ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 0.71$) and the non-innocent victims ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 0.84$, $p < .001$), $F(1, 180) = 84.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .49$. Furthermore, a weaker effect of PBJW expression revealed that the targets who expressed high PBJW were judged as suffering less ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.19$) than those who expressed low PBJW ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 0.98$), $F(1, 180) = 26.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .13$.

In sum, the degree of expressed PBJW and victim innocence were manipulated successfully. Also as intended, innocent and non-innocent victims were judged as suffering at an equivalent level and more so than the non-victims.

Main Analyses

In order to test our hypotheses, we ran four 2 (degree of expressed PBJW: high/low) X 3 (target identity: innocent victim/non-innocent victim/non-victim) ANOVAs, one for each positive and negative dimension of social value⁷. Degrees of freedom vary among analyses due to missing responses on different measures.

As can be seen in Table 1, there were PBJW main effects on all four dependent variables, $F_s \geq 14.03$, $p_s < .001$, $\eta^2_{ps} \geq .07$. Consistent with H1, the targets who expressed high versus low PBJW were on the

⁶ Although the latter two adjectives are positively balanced we have decided to keep them to be faithful to the factorial structure. Furthermore, results did not change when we excluded them.

⁷ We chose not to use a mixed-measures ANOVA with the dimensions of social value as the repeated factor, which would allow us to compare among the four dependent variables, because some participants did not respond to all items (as can be seen in the different degrees of freedom of the ANOVAs). As a result, they would be excluded from all analyses. Furthermore, comparing among the four variables is not the focus of this article. Also, the significant differences between the positive and the negative valences of each dimension would not reflect different patterns, but mostly mean differences due to the fact that a negative dimension is the "reverse" of its positive counter-part. Nevertheless, we report the effects obtained with the mixed-measures ANOVA. The conclusions we get are the same with only slight variations of the means and standard deviations. A 2 (degree of expressed PBJW: high/low) X 3 (target identity: innocent victim/non-innocent victim/non-victim) X 4 (dimensions of social value: positive social utility/ negative social utility/ positive social desirability/ negative social desirability), with the latter factor as within-participants, indicated the following significant effects: degree of PBJW expressed, $F(1, 174) = 34.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .17$; target identity, $F(2, 174) = 7.29$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2_p = .08$; dimensions of social value, $F(3, 522) = 89.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .34$; degree of PBJW expressed * dimensions of social value, $F(3, 522) = 101.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .38$; target identity * dimensions of social value, $F(6, 522) = 50.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .37$; degree of PBJW expressed * target identity * dimensions of social value, $F(6, 522) = 3.06$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2_p = .03$.

whole judged as more positively useful and desirable, and as less negatively useful and desirable. There were also target identity main effects on all four dependent variables, $F_s \geq 8.38$, $p_s < .001$, $\eta^2_{ps} \geq .09$. As can be seen in Table 2, and consistent with H2, the targets presented as non-victims were always judged as the most positively and the least negatively useful and desirable ones. Nevertheless, there were other patterns worth mentioning. In the case of positive social utility and negative social desirability, the innocent and the non-innocent victims were judged as equally low. In the case of positive social desirability and negative social utility, however, the non-innocent victim was the most harshly judged target, with the innocent victim being judged as highly as the non-victim.

Table 1. Means (and standard deviations) of positive and negative social utility and social desirability by expressed Personal Belief in a Just World (PBJW)

	Low PBJW	High PBJW	F test
Positive social utility	3.30 (1.23)	3.79 (1.26)	$F(1, 175) = 14.03, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .07$
Positive social desirability	3.73 (1.05)	4.70 (1.01)	$F(1, 177) = 44.37, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .20$
Negative social utility	3.20 (1.46)	2.50 (1.22)	$F(1, 179) = 24.39, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .12$
Negative social desirability	5.51 (0.93)	3.17 (1.20)	$F(1, 176) = 271.52, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .60$

Table 2. Means (and standard deviations) of positive and negative social utility and social desirability by target identity

	Innocent victim	Non-innocent victim	Non-victim	F test
Positive social utility	3.08 (0.97) _a	2.85 (0.92) _a	4.70 (0.99) _b	$F(2, 175) = 72.14, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .45$
Positive social desirability	4.53 (1.13) _a	3.83 (1.12) _b	4.31 (1.07) _a	$F(2, 177) = 8.38, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .09$
Negative social utility	2.12 (0.93) _a	4.10 (1.22) _b	2.27 (0.97) _a	$F(2, 179) = 79.67, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .20$
Negative social desirability	4.48 (1.56) _a	4.65 (1.23) _a	3.84 (1.82) _b	$F(2, 178) = 13.61, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .13$

Note. Values in line with different subscripts are different at $p < .05$ (Tukey post-hoc tests)

Further analyses supported the hypothesis that participants would focus on the social value of PBJW (H4) rather than on the fact that the victims suffered very much and permanently (H3) or on their (non)innocence (H5.1 – H5.4). This inference derives from the interaction on negative social desirability, which can be consulted in Table 3. Tukey post-hoc tests indicated that the three targets who expressed high versus low PBJW were judged less negatively (no significant differences among the three targets who expressed low PBJW, $p_s \geq .87$). Indeed, the interaction is significant because the non-victim who expresses high PBJW is even less negatively judged than the victims who also express high PBJW.

Table 3. Means (and standard deviations) of positive and negative social utility and social desirability by expressed Personal Belief in a Just World (PBJW) and target identity

	Low PBJW			High PBJW			F test
	innocent victim	non-innocent victim	non-victim	innocent victim	non-innocent victim	non-victim	
Positive Social Utility	2.94 (1.00)	2.57 (0.92)	4.35 (0.96)	3.22 (0.94)	3.13 (0.86)	5.06 (0.90)	$F(2, 175) = 0.69, p = .45, \eta^2_p = .01$
Positive Social Desirability	4.02 (1.08)	3.31 (1.14)	3.86 (0.80)	5.03 (0.95)	4.31 (0.88)	4.78 (1.11)	$F(2, 177) = 0.34, p = .97, \eta^2_p < .001$
Negative Social Utility	2.25 (1.06)	4.61 (1.07)	2.72 (1.00)	1.99 (0.78)	3.62 (1.18)	1.83 (0.72)	$F(2, 179) = 2.48, p = .09, \eta^2_p = .03$
Negative Social Desirability	5.65 _a (0.90)	5.51 _a (0.92)	5.37 _a (0.97)	3.35 _b (1.19)	3.85 _b (0.92)	2.26 _c (0.89)	$F(2, 178) = 8.54, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .09$

Note. Values with different subscripts are different at $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

Research on PBJW expression has consistently shown that non-victimized targets are judged as having more social value if they say their lives are generally versus rarely just (Alves & Correia, 2010a, 2013; Testé et al., 2012; Testé & Perrin, 2013). Specifically, they are judged to a higher extent as having both what it takes to be successful (i.e., social utility) and what it takes to be liked (i.e., social desirability) (Beauvois, 1995; Beauvois & Dépret, 2008; Cambon, 2006). These results have been interpreted as indicating that the expression of high PBJW is a judgment norm (Alves & Correia, 2010a). With this study our main goal was to test whether the social value of high versus low PBJW expression is also stronger when the targets are presented as innocent or non-innocent victims. As a secondary goal, we also intended to test whether the social value of PBJW would differ depending on the valence of the social value dimensions.

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Our results are very clear: the expression of PBJW is socially valued regardless of whether the targets are non-victims or (non-)innocent victims who suffer intensely and permanently. Indeed, participants consistently judged the targets who expressed high versus PBJW more positively on the positive dimensions of social value. Furthermore, they judged those targets less negatively on the negative dimensions of social value. The effects were stronger on social desirability, especially negative social desirability, than on social utility.

The degree of expressed PBJW and target identity only interacted significantly on negative social desirability. Even in this case, however, there was not a reversal of the general pattern. Specifically, all targets expressing high versus low PBJW were judged less negatively on this dimension of social value. This interaction simply reflected the fact that the non-victim who expressed high PBJW was judged even less negatively than their victim counterparts. We are aware, however, that a less benign interpretation of this pattern is possible. In fact, by drawing a parallel with the literature on racism (e.g., Pettigrew & Marteen, 1995), this pattern may reflect an example of blatant victimization, that is, a direct indication that victims have more negative value than non-victims. This interpretation is also supported by the main effect of target identity. Specifically, participants judged the non-victims as having the highest positive and the lowest negative social value. Judgments of the non-innocent victims indicated the reversed pattern. In the case of innocent victims, participants judged their social value at an intermediate level. In fact, depending on the dimension and valence of social value, participants judged the innocent victims as equivalent to the non-innocent victims (low positive social utility and high negative social desirability) or the non-victims (low negative social utility and high positive social desirability).

At this point we would like to stress that the effects involving the expression of PBJW were stronger on social desirability than on social utility. In our view, this may be explained by the fact that most targets were highly suffering and disabled victims, thus having low market value in our society (i.e., social utility). Thus, the social value of high PBJW expression was more reflected in their social desirability than on their social utility. Consistent with this view, the main effect of target identity was felt more strongly on social utility than on social desirability. We should stress that previous research found that the expression of different degrees of PBJW also influenced social desirability judgments (e.g., Alves & Correia, 2010a). In contrast to our study, however, in those studies the influence of expressed PBJW on social utility was stronger than on social desirability (Testé & Perrin, 2013). This contrast between our study and previous research is an interesting finding.

Indeed, as far as we know, the literature has only ascertained that the attribution of social utility or social desirability to targets may differ across the judgment norms they express. In other words, two judgment norms may differ in the extent to which they are anchored on one or the other dimension of social value (e.g., Dubois, 2005; Dubois & Beauvois, 2005). Our study suggests, however, that these anchors may not necessarily be fixed within a given judgment norm. Instead, they may vary depending on target identity. Future research should investigate this matter into more detail and identify factors that may change the anchorage of social value within judgment norms (e.g., contextual factors).

We would like to indicate some limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, we did not manipulate victim suffering which was presented as very serious and permanent. This was mainly intended to test whether the social value of PBJW expression resisted to an extreme example of injustice. Possibly, the effect of PBJW expressed should be stronger on social utility than social desirability if victim suffering is less serious (thus having a higher market value). Furthermore, it would also be interesting to present targets as either responsible or non-responsible for an accident resulting in no suffering. In this way the victims would have more in common with the non-victims. Second, we only presented victims of a car accident. Thus, we cannot rule out that in other kinds of victimization the results would be different. We think it would be fruitful to also present victims whose suffering is perceived as resulting from a breach in moral norms. Finally, our study clearly indicates that these three targets are judged more positively and less negatively when they express high versus low PBJW. Nevertheless, the reasons underlying these judgments may not be the same or, at least, they may differ in strength according to target identity. Future research should thus identify possible mediators. For instance, it is possible that non-victims who express high versus low PBJW are more socially valued mainly because they are perceived as having a discourse that fits societal norms. As stated in the introduction, this corresponds to the main assumption in research on PBJW expression, which has focused on non-victims as targets. In the case of innocent victims, the higher social value of those who express high versus low PBJW may derive mainly from their being perceived as individuals who have adapted psychologically to their situation, thus showing a more positive approach to life. In the case of non-innocent victims, the higher social value of those who express high versus low PBJW may derive from the fact that they accept responsibility (at least, discursively) for their situation. The assumed expression of personal responsibility corresponds to the norm of internality (Dubois, 1994), another judgment norm in individualistic societies and contexts.

CONCLUSION AND AFTERTHOUGHTS

Despite the aforementioned limitations, we think this study represents an important contribution to research on PBJW expression. This study reinforces the notion that the expression of high PBJW is a judgment norm, that is, a valued discourse irrespective of its truth. This notion was reinforced to a surprising level.

In fact, as researchers, we predicted the possibility that victims, both innocent and non-innocent, could be evaluated more positively if they expressed high versus low PBJW. As citizens, however, we admit this finding was a big surprise. Indeed, this finding indicates that the social value of the expression of high PBJW can be very resistant to contextual shifts, such that our independent variables only interacted on one out of four dependent variables. Even in this case, however, the patterns were not different for victims and non-victims; they were simply of different magnitude. Our results must thus not be seen as a “mere” replication of previous research on the normativity of PBJW. Instead, they show that the expression of PBJW is a socially demanded discursive performance even when it seems objectively unreasonable to make such demands. Given that our study is experimental, we cannot ascertain whether or not our results have ecological validity. Nevertheless, we hope they at least motivate people to reflect on one issue: as a community we may be pressurizing victims to express unreasonable claims about their lives.

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