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Rationalizers or realists? The effects of transgressors' just world beliefs within committed relationships

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ABSTRACT

We test the interpersonal consequences of transgressors' BJW-others and BJW-self within the context of committed (or non-committed) relationships. Across two studies, one utilizing a recall paradigm allowing an insight into the real and varied experiences of transgressors ($N = 221$), the other a hypothetical scenario where commitment was manipulated ($N = 139$), BJW-others was associated with increased transgressor rationalization of behavior whereas BJW-self was associated with decreased rationalization. The effect of BJW-others was dampened in committed relationships due to low BJW-others. Implications for interpersonal relationships are discussed.

1. Introduction

Arguably the most influential theory of justice is that which concerns individuals' beliefs in a just world (BJW; for a summary, see Lerner, 1980). Lerner theorized that humans have a preconscious, fundamental need to believe in a world where events are logical and controllable: Where people get what they deserve and deserve what they get, where good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. Believing in such a world provides individuals with a conceptual framework for making sense of their experiences, empowering them to proceed through life confident in the predictability of events and fairness of outcomes, and buffering them when they have personal and vicarious experiences where the world, objectively, is not predictable, or controllable, or fair.

Accordingly, people are motivated to defend against threats to their BJW (Lerner, 1980). This has significant implications for how people deal with instances of injustice or bad luck. Equally significant is the idea that individuals compartmentalize their spheres of justice, according to whether the world is just for others (BJW-others) or the self (BJW-self) (for a brief review see Strelan & Sutton, 2011). A vast literature, accumulated over almost 50 years, has consistently demonstrated that when individuals observe others experiencing unfair or unfortunate events and perceive they are unable to do anything about it, they will rationalize by expressing harsh social attitudes, including derogating and blaming victims such as the third world poor, the physically and mentally challenged, cancer and AIDS patients, and accident and rape victims (for reviews see Furnham, 2003; Hafer & Bègue, 2005). Doing so re-calibrates others' negative experiences as deserved—reflecting a view that the world is just for others—thereby restoring a just world.

BJW also enables individuals to cope better when they themselves experience an unfair or unfortunate event. Victims with strong BJW-self tend to rationalize by downplaying and reframing (for a brief review see Dalbert, 2002). Doing so reduces the extent of the injustice, enabling victims to reassure themselves that they are not bad people for having experienced it. Ergo, a just world is restored. For example, among victims of rape, serious accidents, natural disasters, job loss, and infidelity and abuse, heightened BJW-self has been shown to have an adaptive effect on wellbeing and self-esteem and even approach-oriented behavior (see Dalbert, 2002; Strelan, 2007).

Regardless of the sphere of justice, BJW is a powerful lens through which to view and understand responses to third-party and personal injustice and suffering. Curiously, however, one perspective has rarely been examined: That of offenders themselves. Only two studies (Dalbert & Filke, 2007; Otto & Dalbert, 2005) have even considered the just world beliefs of transgressors, measuring criminal offenders' BJW-self in relation to their *own* treatment, welfare, and goals following sentencing. These studies found that prisoners with strong BJW-self coped better. The focus of the present study, however, is on the implications of perpetrator BJW for

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the *interpersonal* consequences of their actions within interpersonal relationships. In addition, we will measure not only BJW-self but also BJW-other. As we will see shortly, distinguishing between BJW for self and others leads to quite different predictions.

Just world beliefs are necessarily delusional (Lerner, 1980). As we have noted, rationalization is often required to maintain a just world, particularly when people encounter the many and inevitable instances where the world is clearly not just. At the same time, individuals cannot ignore the very real demands of their relationships with others—particularly those to whom they are highly committed. Thus, in this article we are interested in the extent to which a transgressor's just world need for rationalization is magnified—or diminished—depending on whether their relationship with their victim is committed or not.

Commitment refers to an individual's intent to persist in a relationship, including a long-term orientation and psychological attachment to the relationship (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). It develops out of dependence on the relationship, as a function of the additive effects of satisfaction with and investment in the relationship and perceiving no viable alternatives to persisting (Rusbult et al., 1998). A defining feature of committed relationships is a mutual willingness by partners to embrace relationship-maintaining behaviors during those times when it would appear not to be in an individual's short term interest to do so—for example, sacrificing a desired activity for a partner's preference (Van Lange et al., 1997); forgiving (McCullough et al., 1998) or accommodating (Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994) when a partner acts contrary to relationship-relevant norms and expectations. Partners in non-committed relationships are less willing to engage in mutually beneficial interdependent behaviors (for a review see Rusbult et al., 1998). Importantly, individuals in committed relationships are better able to take a partner's perspective (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998) and more likely to engage in remedial effort when they transgress—including taking responsibility and legitimizing their partner's experience (for a brief discussion see McCullough et al., 1998).

In short, transgressors in committed relationships are less likely to rationalize their transgression. We propose that this relation will be moderated by the extent to which transgressors believe in a just world for others. Causing another to suffer makes BJW-others salient and constitutes a threat to one's just world framework. Indeed, the threat is experienced more keenly when the injustice is visited upon another in one's moral circle (Lerner, 1980)—including, therefore, partners in both non-committed and committed relationships. Thus, in order to restore a just world, transgressors with strong BJW-others have a need to rationalize their offending action, regardless of the nature of their relationship with the victim.

What, however, of individuals who endorse *low* BJW-others? For them, transgressing against another does not threaten just world beliefs because there is no just world to defend. Accordingly, there is no just world imperative to rationalize behavior, across both non-committed and committed relationships. However, there *is* an imperative in a committed relationship to behave according to relationship-relevant rules and norms, including enacting relationship-restorative responses following a transgression (Rusbult et al., 1998). Thus, BJW-others is most likely to have an effect on rationalizing behavior in committed relationships; however, the effect will be such that rationalizing will be reduced further and will be driven by a *low* belief in a just world for others.

To elaborate on likely relations between BJW-self and commitment and rationalization, we must first note the foundations upon which the BJW framework is built. Through early socialization and reinforcement experiences individuals learn, among other things, the relationships between cause and effect and between effort and reward. In so doing, they develop an implicit personal contract with the world: In exchange for behaving appropriately and decently and fairly—that is, according to social rules and norms—the world will treat them accordingly (Lerner, 1980). Thus, when a person transgresses, they have broken the contract, thereby making BJW-self salient. They must deal with the dissonance between their transgression and the desire to maintain a just world for the self. One way to reduce the dissonance is to return to acting according to the personal contract. All things being equal, the normative response when one hurts another is not to rationalize but, rather, take responsibility (e.g., Heider, 1958).

Thus, we expect a negative relation between BJW-self and rationalization. Further, this relation will be magnified in committed relationships. BJW-self encourages prosocial responding to the extent that individuals have been empowered by the personal contract to believe they will rewarded down the line for present investments (see Dalbert, 2002). For example, when transgressed against, victims with high BJW-self are more likely to engage approach-oriented responses such as forgiving rather than retaliating (Strelan, 2007; Strelan & Sutton, 2011). Such action has a long-term payoff: It buys credit for when victims themselves may require an accommodating response from partners and it helps restore to victims valued relationships (see Strelan & Sutton, 2011). Transgressors with high BJW-self should behave in a similar manner in committed relationships. They are more likely to engage in conciliatory behavior in committed relationships, because these relationships provide confidence that such future-oriented action will be accepted and ultimately rewarded through reciprocation and access to the continuing psychological benefits offered by the relationship.

We report the results of two studies. In the first study we utilized a cross-sectional recall design to establish that the predicted relations exist in the real world. In the second study we employed a hypothetical scenario embedded in an experimental design, with the aim of providing a 'cleaner' test of the relations observed in Study 1 and demonstrating that they are replicable across methodologies.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

There were 221 North American participants (117 females, 104 males, M_{age} = 32, SD = 10.81) recruited via M-Turk and paid $0.50 each.

2.1.2. Procedures and materials

First, participants completed measures of *BJW-self* and *BJW-other* (Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996; eight items, each; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). Scores for each subscale were summed and averaged so that higher scores reflect stronger BJW (BJW-self α = .91; BJW-others α = .92).

Next, participants read: "All of us, at some stage in our lives, do things that hurt another person. We would like you to recall a situation from the recent past where you hurt or upset someone. You need to still be in contact with the person you hurt (so, most likely you will recall an incident with a partner, or a family friend, or a friend)". To make the victim salient throughout the study, participants wrote the first name of the person they had hurt. This name would automatically appear wherever relevant in subsequent items. They then were asked to describe what happened, specifically, what they did to the victim and the circumstances that led them to act the way they did. Participants also indicated the nature of the relationship with the person they hurt (*romantic partner; family member; friend; other*).

For all subsequent items, below, scales were 1 = *completely disagree*; 7 = *completely agree* unless otherwise indicated.

Given the cross-sectional recall nature of the design, it was necessary to measure several variables specific to the transgression event that had the potential to obscure relations between our key variables. We planned to control for them in analyses. They were: *time elapsed* since the event (days); the perceived *hurtfulness* of the offender's actions ('My actions hurt [victim's name]'); perception of the *victim's role* in the event ('My actions were in response to something [victim's name] initiated' [*yes/no*]); and perceptions of the victim's response (*victim grudge-holding*), consisting of six items: '[victim's name]... has forgiven me' [reverse-coded]; 'got back at me for what I did'; 'still bears a grudge'; 'won't let me forget what I did to him/her'; 'still holds it against me'; and 'I feel like I still owe [victim's name]'. Scores were summed and averaged so that higher scores suggest greater perceptions that the victim held a grudge ($\alpha = .78$).

For the DV we developed an index of the extent to which the transgressor rationalized his/her actions (*Rationalization*), operationalized on the basis of several inter-related variables typically implicated in just world responding: downplaying of the significance of the event ('What I did wasn't so bad'); defensive attributions ('In the circumstances what I did was fair enough'); victim blaming ('[victim's name] asked for it'; '[victim's name] must bear some responsibility for what happened'); and denial of responsibility ('I was responsible for what happened' [reverse-coded],' 'I tried to make amends for my actions' [reverse-coded] and 'What I did was beyond my control'). A confirmatory factor analysis indicated that a model in which these seven items loaded on the same underlying factor had a good fit to the data (NFI = 0.92; CFI = 0.94). Hence, scores were summed and averaged into a reliable scale ($\alpha = .79$) so that higher scores indicate greater rationalization by the offender.

Finally, *relationship commitment* was measured with the five-item commitment subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998). Scores were summed and averaged so that higher scores indicate greater commitment ($\alpha = .90$).

2.2. Results and discussion

2.2.1. Background variables

Participants described a variety of hurtful actions, including infidelity, discontinuing a relationship, verbal abuse, and physical abuse. Approximately 43% of victims were romantic partners; 35% were friends; and 23% were family members. The sample was split almost exactly 50% on whether or not the victim was perceived to have initiated the hurtful event. Average time elapsed since the event occurred was 231 days ($SD = 251$). Participants tended to strongly agree that they had hurt the victim ($M = 6.18$, $SD = 1.10$).

2.2.2. Relations between just world beliefs, commitment, and rationalization

We conducted a hierarchical regression analysis with rationalization as the outcome variable. After standardizing and mean centering, we entered BJW-self, BJW-other, and commitment at step 1, and the interaction terms (BJW-self × Commitment and BJW-others × Commitment) at step 2. The control variables (time elapsed; hurtfulness; victim's role; and grudge-holding) were entered at step 3 to see if the expected main and interaction effects persisted even when event-specific information was taken into account.

It may be seen from Table 1 that at step 1 there were significant main effects for BJW-self, BJW-others, and commitment. At step 2 there was no significant interaction for BJW-self × Commitment, but there was one for BJW-others × Commitment. At step 3 the inclusion of the background variables weakened the main effects of the BJW variables but the interaction of BJW-others × Commitment remained significant.

An analysis of the simple slopes indicated no significant effect of BJW-others when commitment was low ($\beta = -.07$, $p = .42$), but a significant effect when commitment was high, ($\beta = .28$, $p = .003$) (see Fig. 1), thus confirming our hypothesis. We then examined commitment-level differences within BJW-others. There was no effect of commitment when BJW-others was high ($\beta = .01$, $p = .93$) but a significant effect when BJW-others was low ($\beta = -.35$, $p < .001$), indicating that the effect of BJW-others on rationalization in committed relationships is driven by the extent to which transgressors possess *low* BJW-others.

In summary, there were main effects for the BJW variables and commitment, in the expected directions. There was no evidence of a BJW-self × commitment interaction. However, and as predicted, transgressors' BJW-others appears to magnify the relation between commitment and rationalizing responses, with the effect due to transgressors' low BJW-others. While the addition of transgression-specific variables to the equation significantly dampened the main effects of the BJW variables, the BJW-others × Commitment interaction was retained. Given the inevitable noise associated with a cross-sectional recall paradigm, the results are encouraging. At the same time, it is clear that a more controlled experimental design is required to confirm our findings. This was the focus of our second study.

3. Study 2

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

Participants were 139 undergraduates from a large Australian university participating for partial course credit (100 women, 39 men; $M_{age} = 26$, $SD = 10.40$).

3.1.2. Procedures and materials

Participants completed online the same BJW scales as Study 1 (BJW-self $\alpha = .89$; BJW-others $\alpha = .85$). They were then randomly allocated to one of two commitment conditions. Participants read: "All of us, at some stage in our lives, do things that hurt another person. We would like you to imagine yourself in the following hypothetical scenario.

High commitment: Imagine that you are currently in a relationship where you are highly committed to your partner. In other words, the relationship is important to each of you; you both work hard to ensure that the relationship is fulfilling for each of you; and you plan to keep doing so into the future. One night you have a big argument. You end up saying some extremely hurtful things to your partner. He/she is really upset. Please take a few moments to vividly imagine yourself in this situation".

Low commitment: Imagine that you are currently in a new relationship with someone. You have only been going out with him/her for a few weeks. You are not committed to the relationship, but are just enjoying it while it lasts. One night you have a big argument. You end up saying some extremely hurtful things to your partner. He/she is really upset. Please take a few moments to vividly imagine yourself in this situation".

The *manipulation check* item was: 'In this scenario, I am imagining that my commitment to the relationship is...*high/low*'.

Next we measured *rationalization*, introducing items with the statement, 'Now we would like you to imagine how you might think and feel after knowing you had upset your partner'. Items were the same as in Study 1, except worded to reflect the hypothetical nature of the transgression (1 = *completely disagree*; 7 = *completely agree*). Again, a confirmatory factor analysis

Table 1
Summary of hierarchical regressions for relations between BJW, commitment, and rationalization, study 1 (N = 221).

Step		Rationalization β	sr^2
1	BJW-self	−.183*	.02
	BJW-others	.166*	.02
	Commitment	−.228***	.05
		$F(3, 205) = 5.71$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .077$	
2	BJW-self	−.186*	.02
	BJW-others	.176*	.02
	Commitment	−.221***	.05
	BJW-self × Commitment	.027	.00
	BJW-others × Commitment	.208**	.03
		F_{change} (2, 203) = 5.92, $p = .003$, $R^2_{change} = .051$	
3	BJW-self	−.125^	.01
	BJW-others	.105	.01
	Commitment	−.172**	.03
	BJW-self × Commitment	.033	.00
	BJW-others × Commitment	.196**	.02
	Time elapsed	.012	.00
	Hurtfulness	−.290***	.08
	Victim's role	.417***	.17
	Victim grudge-holding	.066	.00
		F_{change} (4, 199) = 24.12, $p < .001$, $R^2_{change} = .285$	

^ $p < .10$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

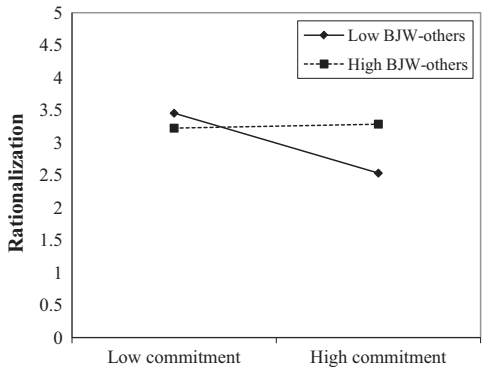

Fig. 1. Interaction between BJW-others × commitment on rationalization, study 1.

indicated a good fit of a model where these seven items loaded on the same factor (NFI = 0.94; CFI = 0.98). Scores were summed and averaged so that higher scores indicate greater likelihood of rationalization (α = .76).

3.2. Results and discussion

3.2.1. Manipulation check

All participants correctly identified the experimental condition to which they had been assigned.

3.2.2. Relations between BJW, commitment, and rationalization

We conducted a hierarchical regression with rationalization as the outcome variable. After standardizing and mean centering where applicable, we entered BJW-self, BJW-other, and commitment condition (contrast coded −1 = *low* and 1 = *high*) at step 1. The interaction terms for BJW-self × Commitment and BJW-others × Commitment were entered at step 2.

It may be seen from Table 2 that at step 1 both BJW variables were significantly associated with rationalization, and commitment was marginally significant, in the expected directions. At step 2 both interaction terms were significant.

Simple slopes analysis indicated there was no effect for BJW-others in the low commitment condition, $\beta = -.027$, $p = .86$, but a significant effect in the high commitment condition, $\beta = .46$, $p < .001$ (see Fig. 2). We next examined differences in commitment within BJW-others, finding no effect when BJW-others was high ($\beta = .03$, $p = .80$) but a significant effect when it was low ($\beta = -.36$, $p = .007$), confirming that the effect of BJW-others on rationalization is driven by the extent to which individuals possess low BJW-others.

Simple slopes analysis confirmed no effect of BJW-self in the low commitment condition ($\beta = .01$, $p = .94$) but a significant effect in the high commitment condition ($\beta = -.48$, $p < .001$) (see Fig. 3). We subsequently examined differences in commitment within BJW-self, finding no effect when BJW-self was low ($\beta = .08$, $p = .49$) but a significant effect when it was high ($\beta = -.41$, $p < .001$), indicating that the effect of BJW-self on rationalization is driven by strong BJW-self.

In summary, main effects for the BJW variables and each of the interaction terms were significant. The effect of BJW-others within the high commitment condition was due to the influence of transgressors' low BJW-others whereas the effect of BJW-self in the high commitment condition was due to transgressors' beliefs that the world treats the self fairly.

4. General discussion

Arguably the most ubiquitous theory of justice is that pertaining to just world beliefs. Yet, despite almost 50 years of research examining vicarious and personal responses to injustice and misfortune, rarely has the focus been on the just world beliefs of transgressors themselves. The two previous studies in this area were concerned with the extent to which BJW-self fulfilled a coping function for prisoners (Dalbert & Filke, 2007; Otto & Dalbert, 2005). The present studies, however, addressed the *interpersonal* consequences of transgressors' just world beliefs.

Three main conclusions can be drawn from the current research. First, the more transgressors believe the world treats others fairly, the more likely they will rationalize their actions. Second, the deleterious effect of BJW-others on rationalization is

Table 2
Summary of hierarchical regressions for relations between BJW, commitment, and rationalization (β values), study 2 ($N = 139$).

Step		Rationalization	sr^2
1	BJW-self	−.265**	.05
	BJW-others	.280**	.06
	Commitment	−.155^	.02
		$F(3, 135) = 5.57$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .11$	
2	BJW-self	−.240**	.04
	BJW-others	.226*	.03
	Commitment	−.165*	.03
	BJW-self × Commitment	−.251**	.05
	BJW-others × Commitment	.195*	.03
		F_{change} (2, 133) = 3.89, $p = .023$, $R^2_{change} = .049$	

^ $p < .10$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

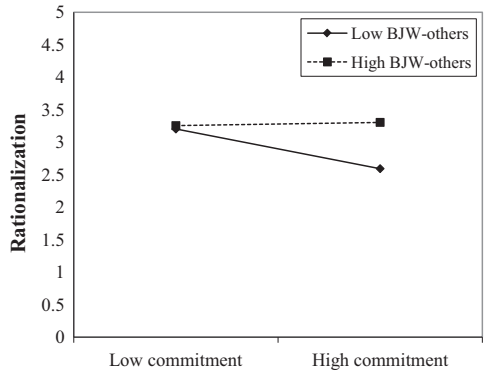

Fig. 2. Interaction between BJW-others × commitment on rationalization, study 2.

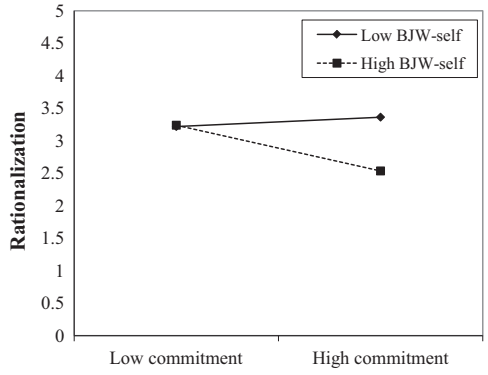

Fig. 3. Interaction between BJW-self × commitment on rationalization, study 2.

dampened in committed relationships, such that transgressors are less likely to rationalize. This effect is driven by transgressors who endorse *low* BJW-others. Third, the more transgressors believe they themselves are treated fairly by the world, the less likely they will rationalize their actions.

The idea that people need to rationalize others' and their own unjust experiences is central to just world theorizing. In the absence of actually being able to restore justice, individuals must resort to doing so psychologically, and often this means rationalizing. However, our findings suggest that, as with the extant literature on victims, the extent to which transgressors rationalize depends on whether they are wearing their BJW-others or BJW-self hat.

To the extent that transgressors believe the world treats others fairly, they are more likely to rationalize their actions, and this is the case irrespective of their commitment to their relationship partner. However, transgressors with *low* BJW-others behave differently in committed relationships. As we theorized, to the extent that individuals have no need to believe that others are treated fairly, there is therefore no just world to defend and therefore no need to rationalize when one transgresses. Moreover, a committed relationship motivates relationship-maintaining behaviors and therefore discourages rationalization. As such, we might say that the more realistic transgressors' beliefs about how others are treated—that is, they are less likely to believe the world treats others fairly—the more appropriately transgressors will respond following a misdeed in a committed relationship.

To the extent that transgressors believe they themselves are treated fairly by the world, the less likely they are to rationalize. Having implicitly bought into a personal contract with the world, the transgressor is therefore beholden to respond to his/her action in a way consistent with the contract: That is, behave appropriately again. One way in which transgressors can achieve this is to *not* rationalize—rather, take responsibility; legitimize the victim's suffering; and re-engage constructively. This result is congruent with previous research showing that criminal offenders with strong BJW-self were more likely to feel guilty about their actions (Otto & Dalbert, 2005) and interpret their legal proceedings and prison treatment as just (Dalbert & Filke, 2007).

We expected that such behavior would be magnified in committed relationships, however, the evidence is inconclusive. The interaction between BJW-self and commitment only emerged as significant in the experimental study. More research is needed to clarify this relation. The noise inherent in the cross-sectional recall design may have obscured the potential effect of the BJW-self × Commitment interaction—but at the same time it is noteworthy that the BJW-others × Commitment interaction remained significant in the recall study despite the inclusion of several influential background variables. Victim's role, in particular, had a strong influence on rationalization (Table 1), as one might expect: The more a victim is seen to be objectively responsible for their own hurtful situation, the less need there is for rationalization and therefore potentially less of an effect of BJW-others. Yet, the BJW-others × Commitment interaction persisted even after taking into account perceptions that the victim initiated the hurtful event themselves.

A strength of the present research is that, at least for the main effects of BJW and the BJW-others × Commitment interaction, we replicated our results across participants in two different continents and two different paradigms. While cross-sectional recall designs and hypothetical scenarios each possess shortcomings, as a package their respective strengths cancel out the other's weaknesses. The recall design is inherently noisy, but demonstrates that the hypothesized relations resonate in instances of actual and varied and often serious transgressions; the hypothetical scenario embedded in an experimental design has reduced ecological validity but possesses strong internal validity, since we were able to

control for the influence of extraneous variables. Indeed, it is notable that in Study 2, in the absence of any apparent objective reason to rationalize or not, individuals with strong BJW-others were still more likely to rationalize and individuals with strong BJW-self were still less likely to do so.

A fundamental principle of BJW theorizing is that rationalization may be more likely to occur if individuals perceive they cannot do anything to actually restore justice. A limitation of the present research is that we did not take into account the extent to which participants made effort to restore justice and whether they perceived the effort was effective. It is true that one of the rationalization DV items (amends) could serve as a proxy for effort but this item was meant to reflect responsibility taking; in addition, it provides no indication of the extent to which making amends was an effective means by which to restore justice—a much more important consideration. Thus, future research should consider manipulating *effective* transgressor effort to restore justice.

Future research should also pursue the potential moderating effects of other variables relevant in a transgression, other than commitment. For example, just world theorizing would predict that the more hurtful the transgression, the greater the threat to a just world and therefore the greater the likelihood that BJW-others will be associated with rationalization. Conversely, we might expect individuals with strong BJW-self to be less likely to rationalize.

The practical implication of these studies is clear. Transgressions are an inevitable part of any relationship, no matter how functional it is. Following a transgression, harmony may more likely be restored in committed relationships if the transgressing partner does not believe the world treats others fairly; and also if they believe the world does treat the self fairly (although the latter evidence is less conclusive). Finally—and regardless of the nature of one's relationship—from a just world perspective, a preferred partner is one who is realistic about how others are treated but is idealistic about how they themselves are treated.

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