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Is Inequality Unjust ? Evaluating Women's Career Chances

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RÉSUMÉ

Sont étudiées les bases motivationnelles de l'évaluation, fréquemment biaisée, des chances de réussite professionnelle chez les femmes. L'étude se centre sur la croyance en un monde juste : « chacun reçoit ce qu'il mérite et mérite ce qu'il reçoit ». Cette croyance apparaît comme l'un des principaux critères de prédiction d'une évaluation subjective comme « juste » d'inégalités objectives dans la trajectoire professionnelle chez les hommes ou les femmes. Ceci est vrai qu'il s'agisse des réponses des sujets masculins comme des sujets féminins (N = 152, dont 65 % de femmes). Les données valident l'hypothèse que l'interprétation des différences liées au sexe dans le domaine professionnel, correspond à une évaluation biaisée motivée par la croyance en un monde juste.

SUMMARY

The motivational bases for frequently biased evaluations of women's career chances are investigated. The study focuses on the belief in a just world : « everybody gets what he/she deserves and everybody deserves what he/she gets ». The results indicated that belief in a just world is one of the most important predictors of rated injustice of objective inequalities in careers between men and women. This is true for male and female respondents (N = 152, 65 % women). The findings are congruent with the just world theory and support the hypothesis that persons' positions on gender-related differences in career situations represent biased evaluations motivated by the belief in a just world.

Mots clés :

Monde juste,
carrières,
discrimination sociale,
femmes.

Key words :

Just world,
career chances,
social discrimination,
women.

Comparative statistics concerning the career situation of men and women show that, according to various criteria, women as a group are in less favorable positions than their male contemporaries. For example, women derive less income and lower job status than do men even though they hold the same jobs ; moreover, a lower percentage of women hold management positions or have careers when compared to their male contemporaries (cf. ADAMY, 1987 ; CLAUSSE & JANSEN, 1984 ; HANDL, 1986 ; MAYER, KRÜGER, RABE-KLEBERG & SCHÜTTE, 1984 ; MOHR, 1987 ; RUDOLPH, MAYER, OSTENDORF & RABE-KLEBERG, 1986 ; summarized by FISCH, 1989). The presence of gender-related differences in the career situations of men and women are subject to little dispute. However, the causes or reasons for these gender-related differ-

ences are a topic of considerable controversy. One common position is that gender-related differences in career situations result from social discrimination against women, and that the principles of equality of treatment and of opportunity in the workplace for males and females have not been achieved. An opposing position holds that the gender-related differences in work and career situations are the result of voluntary decisions made by women themselves. Those holding the latter position perceive no unfairness in the work-related situations of men and women, but proponents of the former position argue that present methods for the allocation of scarce societal resources, which apparently are not gender neutral, place women unjustly at a disadvantage.

The Justice Motive and Judgments of Injustice

It is unlikely that the opposing positions on gender differences in career opportunities and rewards are based on careful and valid empirical studies of the treatment of men and women in occupational settings. Rather, we assume that, as a rule, persons' positions on gender-related differences in career situations represent biased evaluations without a supporting basis of empirical knowledge. The present study was designed to study the motivational bases for these biased evaluations. In this study, we focus on a fundamental belief — the belief in a just world — that may be invoked when one considers gender-related differences in occupational opportunities. The belief in a just world (LERNER, 1977, 1980) corresponds to the belief that everybody gets what he/she deserves and everybody deserves what he/she gets. We hypothesized that, when a person is asked to evaluate a problem of possible injustice such as the disadvantaged career situations of women relative to men, the belief in a just world is used to formulate and justify his/her evaluation.

LERNER (1977) described the belief in a just world as a motive, as a motivated view of the everyday world that is defended whenever possible. The belief in a just world supports the belief that one's own engagements and investments will be rewarding and will pay off. Moreover, this belief engenders the satisfaction that positive outcomes for oneself are well deserved, that such outcomes are not due simply to luck or to the disadvantages of others. In the face of observed inequalities or imbalanced exchanges among persons, the belief in a just world might be defended in either of two ways: (a) by an effort toward actual redistribution, or (b) by changing one's view of the facts through a reinterpretation or other explanation that reduces the perception of injustice (MONTADA, DALBERT, REICHLE & SCHMITT, 1986). For example, if a negative outcome were perceived as voluntarily chosen or as brought about by one's own actions, one could not consider the outcome unjust. Injustice presupposes the violation of a person's just claims by others or by institutions (MONTADA, 1988).

Guided by the hypothesis that individuals hold a belief in a just world, LERNER (1980) gathered evidence about subjective reinterpretations that serve to deny the injustice of facts. Frequently, reinterpretations were invoked whenever an objective reestablishment of justice was beyond one's own control or when its realization would have caused sizeable costs. As an example, few individuals could improve considerably the professional situations of women in our society, and the costs of any continued activity towards this goal such as political engagements by the average person might be rather high. As a result, a subjective reinterpretation — reducing the perceived injustice toward women — would preserve one's belief in a just world.

In the present study, the « belief in a just world » (BJW) was hypothesized to be a motive that varies in strength across individuals. Moreover, we expected effects of BJW on explanations and judgments regarding the fairness of the professional situation of women in our society: the stronger the belief in a just world, the more the inequality of opportunities will be denied and the more frequently women's less favorable professional careers will be explained on the basis of voluntary choices or actions by women. Of course, such views and explanations will, in turn, directly influence judgements about the justice or injustice of any objective differences in the professional situations of men and women, fulfilling their function to preserve the belief in a just world.

The conviction that opportunities and rewards are offered justly must be preserved and defended primarily in one's « own world »; whatever injustice exists in « other worlds » does not affect or alarm us in quite the same way. Thus, the authors expected that the effects of the belief in a just world would be moderated by whether the person perceives a common professional world for men and women or whether the professional worlds of the two genders are seen as independent. Only if a common professional world for men and women is at the core of one's thinking will objective career inequalities between men and women invoke evaluations of relative injustice and thus menace one's belief in a just world. In contrast, a person who considers the professional world of women to be separated from that of men will not find his/her belief in a just world threatened by observed objective inequalities. In this case, we should expect a weaker relationship between the general belief in a just world and the denial of injustice in professional fields as well as a lower need for interpretations related to evaluations of injustice. For our study therefore the questions arise, whether women's career chances are part of women's as well as men's professional world. Are women's unjust career chances equally threatening for men as well for women? If not, the effect of belief in a just world on rated career justice should be moderated by gender.

Mediating Factors

We hypothesized that the effects of BJW on judgments of the justice of objective inequalities will be mediated by arguments that serve to reduce the perceived injustice of an objectively less favorable situation for women. Such arguments may take the form of: 1) denying that women are treated unequally, 2) explaining inequalities by making reference to internal conditions for women or by claiming reference to internal conditions for women or by claiming that women themselves give priority to other areas of life such as the family, 3) denying societal biases against women who choose higher status professional careers, such as traditionally vested societal role expectancies,

or 4) denying that women who choose a higher status career will be judged negatively by others (e.g., losing one's attractiveness as a woman) which implies the presence of social pressure on women to moderate their choice of careers. We expected that a firm belief in a just world would motivate people to explain the objectively less favorable career situation of women as due to internal factors (such as voluntary choice), to deny the possibility of negative judgments and consequences by others when women choose higher status professions (loss of attractiveness), and to contest the presence of unequal treatment in employment situations.

Control Variables

We assessed four types of control variables that might influence evaluations of gender-related differences in occupational situations. First, we assessed the respondents' gender. Men might consider themselves privileged and therefore defend their privilege by denying any injustice. Conversely, women may in the face of objectively less favorable opportunities deny injustice in order to lessen feelings of injustice, which would be a secondary burden adding to the objective disadvantages. Alternative hypotheses may also be considered, including the gender variable in our model which allowed us to assess the effects of respondent gender on evaluations of justice in the work place. Second, we assessed the personal value of professional work, expecting it to influence judgments of justice because questions about justice will be relevant only in areas of life that people consider personally important. Third, we obtained each respondent's major field of study, because the mean level of belief in a just world has been found to vary with the course of study (REICHLE, 1983; MEISSNER, 1987). Finally, we included respondents' age as a control variable, although the potential effects of age are lessened in a college population due to restriction of range.

The following assumptions were to be tested: a) The belief in a just world predicts the rated justice of women's career chances. b) Besides this direct effect of belief in a just world on rated career justice there is a mediated effect as well; mediators are arguments that serve to reduce rated career injustice. c) The effect of belief in a just world on rated career justice should be equal for men and women.

Method

Subjects

The subjects in the study were students majoring in psychology or in law. The selection of these two fields of study was based on previous findings of significant differences between students in these two

fields on ratings of the construct of central interest, the « belief in a just world » (cf. REICHLE, 1983; MEISSNER, 1987). A total of 152 students participated; about half of them were in introductory classes and the other half were graduate students. Twenty-three percent had held a job before they came to the university. The ages of respondents ranged from 19 to 36 years, with a mean of 23 years. Females comprised sixty-five percent of the total sample.

Data were obtained in 1988 from students at a moderate sized German university. Students are a significant group for our purposes, because they are facing important decisions concerning their careers and because they are aware of career opportunities. Moreover, many of today's students will eventually hold positions that will enable them to influence decisions about professional development and hiring practices.

Research Instruments

We were interested in the subjects' interpretations and explanations concerning objective inequalities in professional careers of men and women, presented to subjects as given facts. Thus, subjects received relevant information and statistics from unbiased sources depicting the objective career inequalities of men and women. The material was structured in four parts: 1) choice of education and job, 2) starting professional life (access to education and jobs), 3) professional activities and salaries, 4) promotion to higher positions and the management level. Each of these four sections of information was headed with a title phrase expressing the inequality. The four titles were: 1) Young women are primarily found in professions offering low chances for advancement. 2) Compared to men, women's chances of getting a job are lower. 3) Compared to men, women's income is significantly lower. 4) Women are underrepresented in advanced qualified professions and leadership positions. Following each title, a paragraph of 5 to 8 sentences described gender-related inequalities in the relevant area based on German sources.

Each of the four informational paragraphs was followed by a set of 16 items consisting of potential interpretations and explanations for the inequalities described. On each item, subjects rated their agreement with a statement on a 6-point scale, ranging from « 1 = strongly agree » to « 6 = strongly disagree ». In each set of 16 items, items were formulated to be similar in structure and content. The 16 statements in each set reflected four types of interpretations, which were replicated empirically by means of factor analyses (principal component analyses with varimax rotations). The resulting four-factor solutions were very similar for each of the four sets of items. Therefore, the following four scales were constructed combining items across the four sets: (1) *unequal treatment* (12 items; Alpha = .88; example item:

TABLE I: Significant Correlations ($p \leq .05$) between Rated Justice (RJ), Belief in a Just World (BJW), Unequal Treatment (UT), Loss of Attractiveness (LA), Internal Causes (IC), Social Norms (SN), Importance of Practicing a Profession (IP), Major Field of Study (MJ), Age and Gender ($143 \leq N \leq 158$)

	RJ	BJW	UT	LA	IC	SN	IP	MJ	Age
BJW	.46								
UT	-.71	-.36							
LA	-.38	-.23	-.18*						
IC	-.27		.13*	.44					
SN	-.44		.30	.42	.45				
IP									
MJ	-.27	-.27		.30	.14*	.28			
Age				-.29	-.15*			.15*	
Gender	.29	.16*		-.18*	-.28	-.17*	-.18*	.36	

Note: For RJ, BJW, UT, LA, IC, SN « 1 = strongly agree » and « 6 = strongly disagree »; for IP « 1 = very important » and « 6 = unimportant »; for MJ « 0 = psychology » and « 1 = law »; for gender « 0 = male » and « 1 = female ».

* .01 < p < .05.

TABLE II: Multiple Regressions from Rated Justice, Unequal Treatment (UT), Loss of Attractiveness (LA), Belief in a Just World (BJW), and Importance of Practicing a Profession (IP) on their specific predictor sets (Accepted Models; $p \leq .05$; $143 \leq N \leq 147$)

Independent Variables	R ²	r	beta	b	σ_b	F	P
Dependent Variable: Rated Justice							
UT	.53	-.73	-.63	-.75	.07	131.94	< .01
Gender	.59	.29	.19	.35	.10	13.34	< .01
LA	.62	-.37	-.18	-.17	.05	11.47	< .01
BJW	.64	.44	.13	.14	.06	5.77	< .025
(Intercept)				6.65			
Dependent Variable: Unequal Treatment							
BJW	.14	-.37	-.40	-.35	.07	26.50	< .01
IP	.16	-.11	-.16	-.14	.07	4.52	< .05
(Intercept)				4.31			
Dependent Variable: Loss of attractiveness							
Age	.10	-.31	-.28	-.09	.02	12.81	< .01
MJ ^a	.16	.29	.21	.40	.15	6.64	< .025
BJW	.19	-.24	-.17	-.20	.09	4.85	< .05
(Intercept)			6.47				
Dependent Variable: Belief in a just world							
MJ ^a	.07	-.27	-.27	-.45	.13	11.29	< .01
(Intercept)				4.38			
Dependent Variable: Importance of practicing a profession							
Gender	.03	-.18	-.18	-.33	.15	4.71	< .05
(Intercept)				2.51			

Note: ^a Major field of study.

« Women's chances on the job market are less favorable. »); (2) *internal causes* (16 items; Alpha = .90; example item: « Many women don't strive for high-paid positions by themselves. »); (3) *social norms* (8 items; Alpha = .91; example item: « Beginning from childhood, many women are trained to look for professional positions that will allow them sufficient time for the family. ») (4) *loss of attractiveness* (8 items; Alpha = .92; example item: « By choosing a man's profession young women become unattractive for many men. »).

Next, the subjects' belief in a just world was assessed with the Just World Scale (DALBERT, MONTADA & SCHMITT, 1987). Previously, RUBIN and PEPLAU (1975) proposed a scale to assess the strength of belief in a just world; a translation of this scale, however, showed inadequate psychometric properties in a previous study using German subjects. As a result, DALBERT, MONTADA and SCHMITT (1987) developed the Just World Scale for use in German populations and reported adequate levels of reliability and validity across several samples. The Just

World Scale consists of six items (e.g., « I think that in general there is justice in the world. »). Again, subjects had to rate each statement on 6-point scales with the poles « 1 = strongly agree » and « 6 = strongly disagree ».

Ratings of the justice and fairness of objective gender-related inequalities in each of the four areas covered by the informational paragraphs were used as criterion variables. This section consisted of 8 items, one item for each of the four paragraphs describing the justice of allocation (e.g., « In general the allocation of jobs is fair ») and one item describing the equality of chances (e.g., « Today, men and women have about equal chances to get into a leading position »). Again, subjects were asked to rate each item on the 6-point scale. The scale had adequate internal consistency, Alpha = .92.

The control variables were assessed prior to the psychological variables described above. Subjects were asked to record their age, gender, major field of study (psychology or law), and their personal opinion about the importance of professional life to them. The latter rating was made on a 6-point scale, with the poles « 1 = very important » to « 6 = unimportant ».

The correlation matrix in Table I gives a first impression of the relations among the variables. A positive relationship was found between rated career justice and belief in a just world, and negative relationships between rated justice and the explanation of gender differences as a result of unequal treatment, of social norms, and of loss of attractiveness as an indicator of social discrimination for women who choose a career. Furthermore, students majoring in psychology and women reported more injustice than students majoring in law and men, respectively.

A somewhat surprising negative correlation was found between ratings of justice and agreement with internal causes as an explanation of gender differences. Perhaps, for our subjects, the fact that they prefer internal causes as an explanation has nothing to do with blaming the victims. Quite the contrary, our subjects may be considering internal handicaps. Clearly, further research is needed to differentiate between these two concepts.

To clarify these correlational data further, multivariate analyses were done. The major purpose of these analyses was to identify the direct (cf. assumption a) as well as indirect effects (cf. assumption b) of the key predictor variable belief in a just world (BJW) on the rated justice of women's career chances. The indirect effects of this belief in a just world were assumed to be mediated by the four categories of explanation, (1) unequal treatment, (2) internal causes, (3) social norms, and (4) loss of attractiveness. To identify these effects, a path analysis model was proposed which included rated justice as the criterion, the four categories of explanations as proximal predictors,

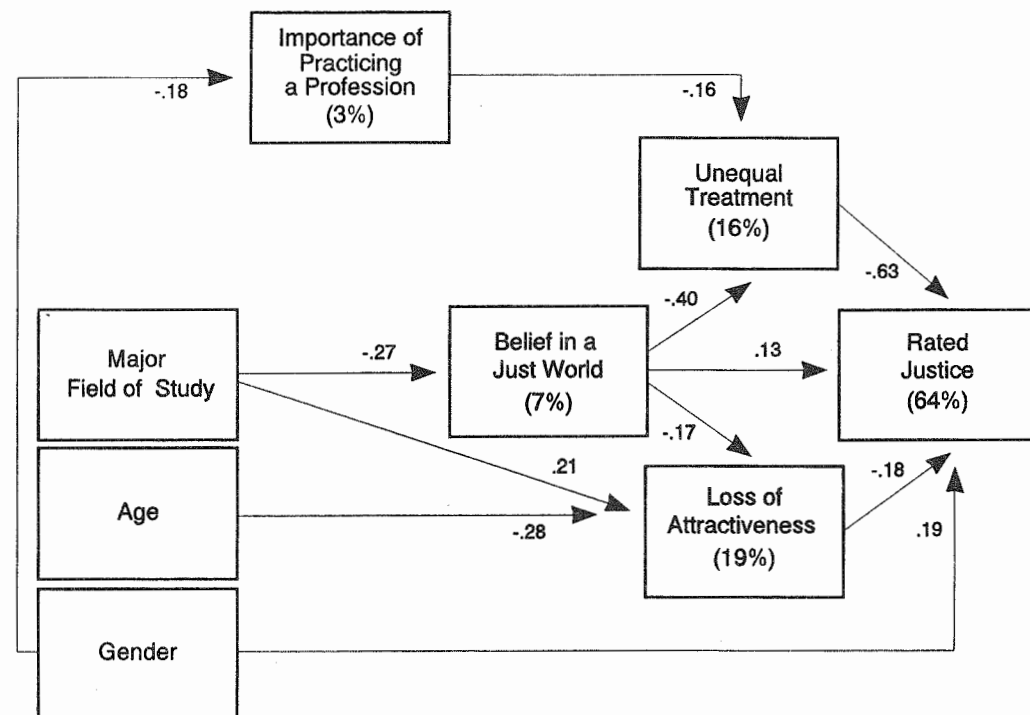
and BJW as distal predictor. The control variables of subjectively rated importance of practicing a profession as well as the model-exogenous variables age, sex and major field of study were also included as distal predictors.

The results of the multiple regression analyses for the significant model-endogenous variables are shown in Table II. In the first section of Table II, the significant predictors of the rated career justice are presented. As was expected, the explanation of gender differences by unequal treatment explained a large part of the variance of rated justice: the greater the degree of perceived inequality in treatment, the greater the perceived injustice of women's career chances. Further significant predictors were subjects' gender (men considered women's career chances as more just than women did), belief in a just world (the stronger the belief in a just world, the lower the rated injustice of women's career chances), and loss of attractiveness (the stronger the denial of loss of attractiveness, the more women's career chances were judged as just). Altogether, the proportion of explained variance was rather large ($R^2 = .64$).

The distal predictors were significantly related to two of the four categories of explanations: (1) unequal treatment and (2) loss of attractiveness. Regression analyses using these scales as dependent variables are shown in the next two sections of Table II. As was predicted, belief in a just world proved to be a significant predictor for both and thereby also had indirect effects on rated justice. With regard to unequal treatment, the lower the belief in a just world, the easier it was to perceive or to admit unequal treatment of women. In other words, the stronger the belief in a just world, the less women were perceived to be treated unequally. Furthermore, the more important a profession was to a subject, the less the unequal treatment of women was acknowledged. In the present sample, rated importance of a profession was higher for women than for men (cf. last section, Table II). For this reason, sex had a small indirect effect (.03) on unequal treatment suggesting that female subjects perceived unequal treatment of women less frequently than male subjects did.

As hypothesized, belief in a just world was also a significant predictor of loss of attractiveness as a reason for women's occupational disadvantages. Loss of attractiveness by women in a career profession — the social costs that arise due to the expected attitudes of men — was more readily acknowledged by subjects whose belief in a just world was low. This was especially true for older subjects and students majoring in psychology. In confirmation of the sampling rationale, belief in a just world was correlated with the field of studies: on the average, students majoring in law had higher levels of belief in a just world than students majoring in psychology.

FIGURE 1 : Path diagram for rated justice of objective gender-related inequalities in career chances [path coefficients are standardized partial regression coefficients (beta), the numbers under the labels are explained variances (R²)].



The preceding results are summed up in Figure 1, which depicts the direct and indirect effects of all variables on the rated justice of jobs and career chances. These direct and indirect effects are presented in Table III, with total effects (the sum of direct and indirect effects) listed in the last column. The impact of belief in a just world proved to be considerable : the total effect of BJW on rated justice amounted to TE = .41 ; only the perception of unequal treatment ranked higher.

TABLE III : Direct (DE), Indirect (IE) and Total (TE) Effects on Rated Justice

	DE	IE	TE
Unequal treatment	-.63		-.63
Loss of attractiveness	-.18		-.18
Belief in a just world	.13	.28	.41
Importance of practicing a profession		.10	.10
Gender	.19	-.02	.17
Major field of study		-.15	-.15
Age		.05	.05

Our assumption about the interaction between belief in a just world and gender in the prediction of rated career justice (cf. assumption c) was tested using regression analysis, with the interaction term as an additional predictor. This interaction was nonsignificant.

Discussion

The results of a path analysis are based on the variables' theoretical order. Accepting this underlying theoretical structure the results can be interpreted as follows : belief in a just world, in which everyone gets what he/she deserves, influences the rated justice of women's unequal job and career chances. The direct and indirect effects of belief in a just world add up to a total effect of .41, which is one of the most important contributions to the prediction of rated justice of gender differences in occupational opportunities. In line with the theory, belief in a just world affects the justice judgments not only directly, but also indirectly, mediated by useful interpretations and explanations of the less favorable job situations for women, such as denying the presence of unequal treatment, or denying loss of attractiveness as an indicator of social costs and handicaps. In other words : the less the subjects believed in a just world, the less they denied the presence of social discrimination against women in their professional life. These results confirm the core hypotheses.

Perceiving inequality in the way women are treated in professional life has numerically the largest total effect in predicting justice judgments. Yet, this result should not be overestimated. The items that measure the criterion variable (rated justice in women's job and career chances) have overlapping effects with this predictor : the concept of equal chances implies the aspect of equal treatment. Considering the

public discussion about women's liberation, it is likely that most of the subjects interpreted the criterion items in the sense of equal treatment for men and women. For that reason, a high correlation between unequal treatment and rated (in-) justice was to be expected. Removing « unequal treatment » from the set of predictors, the prediction structure, shown in Figure 1, remained the same ; the proportion of explained variance, however, dropped from .64 to .39.

The present study allows for some comparisons of the ways in which male and female subjects deal with objective inequalities between men and women in professional life. Some differences between male and female subjects were found on rated justness of women's career chances and in the amount of perceived inequality in treatment. Yet, these differences do not enable one to infer that male and female subjects consider men's and women's professional worlds to be independent of one another, with separate rules of justice for allocations of jobs, salaries, and so forth. On the contrary, an interaction between *belief in a just world* and *gender* of subjects in the prediction of rated justice in career chances was nonsignificant. The lack of an interaction means that women's unjust career chances are equally threatening for both genders. This could be interpreted that, in the perception of both genders, men and women share a common professional world in which the same principles of justice for the allocation of jobs and careers are valid for *both sexes*. Given a common professional world, differences in judging the (in-)justice of the professional situations of women seem to be primarily of a defensive nature. The defense preserves the individual's belief in a just world, a belief that may be illusory.

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