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**Cognitive Dissonance induction as an “inoculator” against negative attitudes
towards victims**

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Abstract

The 'belief in a just world (BJW)' and the related 'justice motive' can be construed as a fundamental drive in people's life. Paradoxically this 'justice motive' may motivate people to be unfair by assigning blame to objectively innocent victims. In two experimental studies, we address the possibility that inducing cognitive dissonance can reduce the assigning of blame to innocent victims. Study 1 (n=71) consisted of a 2 x 2 design in which participants were randomly assigned to two types of induction (Dissonance induction / Awareness Induction Only condition) and two victims' background conditions (innocent victim v non-innocent victim). In Study 2 (n=171) 3 types of induction were compared (Dissonance Induction / Awareness Induction / Control condition) with all victims' scenarios considering them innocent. Study 1 showed that innocent victims were less negatively evaluated in the Dissonance Induction condition compared to the Awareness Only Induction condition; non-innocent victims were not differently evaluated in both conditions. Study 2 showed that innocent victims were less negatively evaluated in the Dissonance Induction condition compared to the Awareness Induction condition and the Control condition. Overall, findings suggest that cognitive dissonance induction can be an effective mechanism to reduce assigning blame to innocent victims.

Keywords: cognitive dissonance, just world belief (BJW), secondary victimisation, justice motive, victim derogation, victim blaming, dissonance induction

Cognitive Dissonance induction as an “inoculator” against negative attitudes towards victims

It is not uncommon that we have negative attitudes towards victims. If someone's wallet gets stolen, we might say 'you should have been more careful'. If a car accident takes place, we often assume the driver was at fault. If a person gets sexually assaulted, it is sometimes assumed he/she drew attention to him- or herself as 'available'.

Negative attitudes towards innocent victims have been explained by the *just world belief (BJW)* and the related *justice motive perspective* (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Simmons, 1966; see Hafer & Begue, 2005 for a review). This theory states that humans are motivated to perceive the world as a just place in which people get what they deserve in order to reduce the perception of threat from the world. Good things happen to good people. Bad things happen to bad people. Success is not the result of being fortunate, but the result of hard work. Failure is the result of lack of effort, not being unlucky. By some, the BJW is considered the core of our hopes in this world, for others it is a delusion (see Furnham, 2003 for a discussion of this issue).

Although the *belief in a just world* has been proven to be correlated with adaptive outcomes, such as engaging in prosocial behaviours (Guo et al., 2022) and developing and investing in long-term goals (Hafer et al., 2015; Sutton & Winnard, 2007), BJW has also been associated with right-wing authoritarianism (Lambert et al., 1998), moralism (Dittmar & Dickinson, 1993) and victim blaming (Correia et al., 2018).

In fact, an especially concerning and undesirable implication of the BJW and the justice motive is the spread of negative attitudes towards the unfortunate in society and

victims of accidents or violence. Several studies have shown the relationship between a strong belief in a just world (BJW) and harsh social attitudes towards vulnerable and marginalized groups within society; these reactions include justifying one's privileges while minimizing the recognition of injustice towards victims (Montada et al., 1986). The most targeted groups are the poor and socioeconomically disadvantaged (Appelbaum et al., 2006), immigrants (Lima-Nunes et al., 2013), foreign workers (Bègue & Bastounis 2003), victims of rape (Strömwall et al., 2013), domestic violence (Valor-Segura et al., 2011) and sexual harassment (De Judicibus & McCabe, 2001), HIV-positive people (Correia et al., 2001), and the elderly (MacLean & Chown, 1988).

The mechanism whereby victims are blamed for their misfortune preserves the perception of a just world so that individuals “can go about their daily lives with a sense of trust, hope, and confidence in their future” (Lerner, 1980, p. 14). It is of particular concern that blaming innocent victims has been shown to decrease the support they receive from others and society in general, which has a detrimental impact on victims’ well-being (e.g., Brickman et al., 1982; Paul et al. 2013).

Furthermore, recent research conducted in the context of hate crimes has shown that, following intergroup harm, individuals tend to attribute the extreme victimization of a group to the group's characteristics rather than to the hate-motivated actions of the perpetrators, ultimately leading to additional crime and discrimination against that group (Dharmapala et al., 2008). This shows that victim derogation, as a BJW preservation strategy, extends beyond the individual victims toward denigrating the group that victims belong to, fostering, for instance, racial (Sullivan et al., 2016) and anti-transgender prejudice (Thomas et al., 2016). Ultimately, it is critical to understand the relationship between BJW and secondary victimization because of its potential deleterious consequences on both victims and society. Investigating these mechanisms

and how to mitigate them can help us stop the cycle of crime and discrimination boosted by secondary victimization. This paper reports on two studies designed to test whether the induction of cognitive dissonance around the blaming process can reduce negative attitudes towards victims.

Belief in a Just World, the Justice Motive and Cognitive Dissonance

According to Lerner (1980), the need for justice is a fundamental motive, although it may vary between individuals and also with the situations people face. When people hear of ‘innocent’ victims, either of accidents, violence, diseases, etc, their just world perspective comes under threat. People are motivated to find ways of reducing this inconsistency and restore their sense of justice. This can be done by trying objectively to improve the situation of innocent victims, for instance by helping them (Correia, et al., 2016), protesting (Runciman, 1966), or seeking retaliation (e.g., Adams, 1965). However, if these responses are not feasible, it is not uncommon to see the perception of justice restored by adopting negative perceptions of the victims, for example by questioning the virtue of the victim (Lerner, 1980).

Indeed, several processes of cognitive restoration of justice when people meet innocent victims have been identified such as denial of the victimization, minimization of the victimization, avoidance of the victim, victim derogation, and victim blaming (Lerner, 1980). All of these decrease the perception of injustice when people face innocent victims. These mechanisms can be understood within the consistency paradigm, and in particular *cognitive dissonance theory* (Festinger, 1957). Cognitive dissonance theory states that when we hold inconsistent notions or when our experiences or behaviours are inconsistent with beliefs we have, this is experienced as unpleasant and motivates efforts to reduce it by resolving the inconsistency or by a

variety of other cognitive or behavioural means. When applied to the BJW, it is evident that when something bad happens to an innocent victim, this violates the belief and will therefore generate dissonance discomfort. Negative attitudes towards victims or blaming them, should be seen as an effort to reduce that dissonance by restoring consistency.

In cognitive dissonance research, two main paradigms have been used to induce attitudinal and behavioural changes: inducing dissonance by asking participants to write counter-attitudinal advocacy essays (e.g., Steinmetz et al., 2019); and inducing dissonance through confronting participants with their counter-attitudinal behaviour (hypocrisy) (Aronson, 1991; e.g., Pyszczynski et al., 1993; Son Hing et al., 2002). Studies using the counter-attitudinal advocacy paradigm (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959) have shown that to reduce the uncomfortable experience of dissonance, participants adapted their attitudes afterwards in the direction of what they had advocated to restore consistency. Studies using this paradigm have been shown to be helpful in reducing racial prejudice (Eisenstadt et al., 2005) and increasing supportive attitudes towards rape victims (Steinmetz et al., 2019).

The hypocrisy paradigm (Aronson, 1991) includes three steps: firstly, an individual must publicly advocate an attitude-consistent behaviour; secondly, the individual must recognize past instances in which he or she, personally, did not uphold the advocated standard; and thirdly individuals have to be given the opportunity to change behaviour or attitudes in a way that allows them to act according to the advocated standard. Studies using this paradigm have been shown to effectively promote a variety of prosocial behaviours, such as water conservation, condom use, and safe driving (see Son Hing et al., 2002 for a review).

We were interested in establishing whether dissonance induction using a hypocrisy paradigm would have an impact on attitudes towards victims. Simply stated,

we hypothesised that if people have in the past advocated culpability of a victim and they are made aware of this undesirable behaviour, this will induce cognitive dissonance and will reduce further blaming and derogating of innocent victims.

The studies

We conducted two studies that analysed the effect of cognitive dissonance induction on reducing negative attitudes towards innocent victims. Adopting the three steps of the hypocrisy paradigm outlined above, we hypothesized that participants who are induced to feel cognitive dissonance because they are asked to recall their own negative treatment of innocent victims will report lower levels of negative attitudes. Their attitudes have been compared to participants who were merely made aware of the negative consequences of the BJW on attitudes towards victims. It was hypothesised that only being made aware of these negative consequences for victims would not reduce negative attitudes.

Data availability

Data of the study are available at the online supplementary repository (https://osf.io/n2bm9/?view_only=1fd32d95a004461d8cff4d78559627f9).

The project and the experimental protocol were approved by the Ethical Committee of the first author's university prior to data collection.

Study 1

The first study was aimed at examining whether participants who were induced with cognitive dissonance would report less negative attitudes towards an innocent victim, compared to those participants that were merely informed about the justice motive and its possible negative consequences. No such difference was expected for a non-innocent victim.

Method

Participants.

Seventy-one university students volunteered in a laboratory experiment for course credit (78% female; age: $M = 20.3$ years; $SD = 1.76$ range = [18-27]). The participants were guaranteed anonymity, and participation was voluntary. Before the study commenced, the participants were required to fill out an online consent form. When participants arrived for the experiment, they were ushered into private cubicles at the lab to ensure anonymity.

Design and Procedure.

In a 2x2 between-subjects design participants were randomly assigned to one of the following four conditions: Dissonance Induction (including Awareness) /Non-Innocent victim; Dissonance Induction (including Awareness) /Innocent victim; Awareness Induction Only/Non-Innocent victim; Awareness Induction Only/ Innocent victim.

The Awareness Induction consisted of a request to state their support for the need for fair treatment of victims. After this priming, they were made aware of the BJW bias. The Dissonance Induction condition also contained these two elements, but in addition participants were asked to recall their own negative treatment of innocent victims in the past. Because this made them become aware of inconsistency between past behaviour and the statement of support, they would have felt hypocritical, and dissonance was induced.

Regarding the type of victims described in the two versions of the scenario, the innocent victim, was not responsible for the car accident whereas the non-innocent

victim, was responsible for the car accident. These two versions of the scenario were used to ascertain differences in response to obvious culpability or innocence.

The dependent variable was the attitude towards the victim. This *Cognitive Dissonance manipulation* was adapted from Son Hing et al. (2002). The manipulation took place in two phases.

Phase 1. Manipulation of Cognitive Dissonance versus Awareness Only:

Participants were primed to support the fairness principle. They were first explicitly asked if they agreed they must treat people fairly. If the answer was YES, they were asked to write an essay on why they believed it was important to treat people fairly. If their answer was NO, we thanked the participants, gave them the extra course credit, and they were dismissed. Only one participant was dismissed. Afterwards, participants were required to read a text in which they were informed about the justice motive theory (BJW) and its' negative consequences (e.g. people may derogate and blame innocent victims) (See Appendix 1). To check that participants had read and understood the information included in the text, they were asked to write down the main points of what they had just read.

The Awareness Induction only condition in phase 1 finished here, while the participants in the Dissonance Induction condition were then asked to write about two situations in which they had blamed a victim (See Appendix 2).

Next, participants were presented with the manipulation check. Participants of both conditions were asked about the level of guilt they felt at that point (1 = none to 7= very much). Several studies have indicated that the guilt emotion represents the dissonance effect (i.e., Kenworthy et al., 2011).

Phase 2. Manipulation of Victim Involvement: Participants were led to a second, apparently unrelated experiment. They were presented with a scenario about a car accident in which the driver suffered serious injuries and were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: in the Innocent condition, participants were informed that the driver was not responsible for what happened (there was a problem on the surface of the road); in the Non-innocent condition, participants were presented with the same scenario, but they were informed that the driver was responsible for what happened (the driver was drunk).

After this, we measured the main dependent variable, Attitudes Towards Victims, with six items: three items measured *Victim Derogation* (Hafer & Gosse, 2011; Payne, et al, 2008) and three items measuring *Victim Blaming* (Van den Bos & Maas, 2009). A composite score of negative attitudes towards victims was computed with the mean of the six previous items and showed to have high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.84$). The items were as follows: “*In general, my impression of the person who has suffered the accident is:* ” (1 = positive to 7 = negative); “*In general, you would say that you like or dislike the person who has suffered the accident (1 = I like them to 7 = I dislike them)*”; “*Your feelings towards the person who has suffered the accident are cold and unfavourable or warm and favourable (1 = cold and unfavourable to 7 = warm and favourable)*”; “*I think the person who has suffered the accident is responsible for what has happened to him/her (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree)*”; “*I believe that the fault lies with the person who has suffered the accident (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree)*”; “*I believe that the person who has suffered the accident is guilty for what happened to him /her (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).*”

After completing phase 2, participants were debriefed.

Results

Manipulation check

The first analysis focused on checking the effectiveness of the manipulation. Participants reported increased feelings of guilt in the Dissonance Induction condition ($M= 4.09$ $SD=1.83$), as compared to the Awareness Induction only condition ($M=2.14$ $SD=1.41$) $t(69) =4.99$, $p <.001$ $d=1.19$ $g=1.18$ [1.69,0.68]. Based on this result we can confirm that the dissonance induction was effective, as participants felt more guilty when they were asked to reflect on past experiences of blaming innocent victims than when they did not (see Kenworthy et al., 2011).

Attitudes towards victims

The second analysis focused on evaluating the impact of cognitive dissonance on negative attitudes towards victims. To do that, we compared the four groups on the global score of negative attitudes towards victims (6 items). A 2 (Type of induction: Dissonance Induction with Awareness vs. Awareness only) X 2 (victims' innocence: non-innocent versus innocent)). Results of an ANOVA revealed a main effect of *Type of Induction* $F(1,71)= 10.76$ $p =.002$ $\eta^2 = .138$ which shows that negative attitudes towards victims were significantly higher in the Awareness Induction only condition ($M=4.45$, $SD=1.08$) compared to the Dissonance Induction condition ($M=3.87$, $SD=1.64$).

In addition, as expected a main effect emerged of victims' innocence $F(1, 71) = 139.40$ $p <.001$ $\eta^2 = .675$, that shows that negative attitudes towards victims were higher in the non-innocent condition ($M=5.25$, $SD=0.82$) compared with the innocent condition ($M=3.04$, $SD=.91$). Moreover, there was a significant interaction between

Victims' Innocence and Type of Induction, $F(1, 71) = 4.85$ $p = .031$ $\eta^2 = .068^1$.

Bonferroni post hoc tests revealed that participants reported less negative attitudes towards victims in the Dissonance Induction X Innocent condition ($M = 2.50$, $SD = .98$) compared to the Awareness Induction Only X Innocent condition ($M = 3.54$, $SD = .46$) $p = .002$ $g = 1.34$ [0.62, 2.10]. As expected, for the Non-Innocent condition, there were no significant differences in the negative attitudes towards victims score between Dissonance Induction ($M = 5.15$, $SD = .94$) and Awareness Only Induction ($M = 5.36$, $SD = .68$) $p = .1.00$ (See Table 1). In short, efforts of participants to reduce their dissonance after having become aware of their own past victim blaming occurred in the form of lower negative attitudes to an innocent victim. However, there is a caveat to this conclusion, as we will discuss below.

Table 1. Means for negative attitudes towards victims in each condition

	Innocent victim condition			Non-innocent victim condition		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Awareness Induction only	18	3.54 _a	.46	18	5.36 _c	.68
Dissonance Induction	17	2.50 _b	.98	18	5.15 _c	.94

Note: Higher scores indicate more negative attitudes towards victims. Means that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .001$

Discussion Study 1

In this study we predicted and found that dissonance induction using the hypocrisy paradigm led to a reduction in victim blaming. Following recalling their own negative treatment of innocent victims and realising its inconsistency with the

¹ Using G*Power software we performed a study of the sensibility Our results indicate that given the sample size and design with the study could detect effect sizes of $f = .33$ with 80% power. A meta-analysis of studies which used a similar experimental paradigm (Priolo et al.,2019) yielded an averaged effect size of $r = .35$ 95% CI [.22 ,.46] which is close to the value which our study can detect with 80% power ($f = .33$, $r = .31$). In the supplementary online material is available the complete output. (https://osf.io/n2bm9/?view_only=1fd32d95a004461d8cff4d78559627f9)

importance of a just treatment of victims, participants showed less negative attitudes towards innocent victims relative to merely making them aware of the negative consequences of the justice motive. For non-innocent victims no such difference was found which is consistent with previous literature in this field (e.g., Correia & Vala, 2003). While it stands to reason to conclude that the dissonance experienced by the participants reduced the negative attitudes towards innocent victims relative to awareness only, the alternative supposition that awareness may have strengthened negative attitudes could not be rejected. Therefore, to resolve the limitation described above, in Study 2 we included a Control condition, in which participants did not receive any induction and were directly presented with the car accident scenario. This way we would have a neutral condition to compare to the dissonance and awareness conditions, which would allow us to establish whether it was the Dissonance condition or the Awareness Only condition that should be considered accountable for the main effect. Furthermore, as we didn't find any differences in the Non-Innocent condition in Study 1, we did not include the Non-Innocent condition in Study 2, so participants were only faced with a situation in which the actor in the scenario was not responsible for his/her misfortune. Finally, in Study 2 we increased the number of participants in each condition.

Study 2

The specific aim of Study 2 was to test whether dissonance experienced by the participants reduced negative attitudes towards innocence or whether being informed about the justice motive theory increased the negative attitudes towards innocent victims. We used a similar methodology as Study 1, but we did not include the Non-Innocent condition and we included a control condition.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 171 Spanish participants (Age: $M = 22.97$, $SD = 2.09$, range = [18-26], 60.2% female) recruited through Netquest Panels, a survey service that enables the targeting of specific demographic groups. The study was implemented by Qualtrics Online Survey Software (<http://www.qualtrics.com/>). Before the study started, the participants had to fill out an online consent form. Participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, and participation was voluntary.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions: Dissonance Induction, Awareness Only Induction or Control Condition. The manipulations to induce awareness and dissonance were the same as in Study 1. Afterwards participants were presented with the dependent variable, the same measure of negative attitudes towards victims (six questions addressing victim blame and derogation) as in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.70$). In the Control condition participants did not receive any induction and were directly presented with the car accident scenario manipulating the victimization situation, followed by the dependent variable. Because no dissonance was generated in the Control Condition, measuring guilt would have been irrelevant and puzzling to the participants and was therefore skipped.

Results

Manipulation check

Similarly to study 1, participants reported increased feelings of guilt in the Dissonance Induction condition ($M = 3.17$ $SD = 1.98$), compared to the Awareness

Induction condition ($M=2.30$, $SD=1.65$), $t(93) = 2.338$, $p = .011$, $d = .47$ $g=0.47$ [0.89,0.070]. This indicated that the dissonance induction had been successful.

Attitudes towards victims

The second analysis focused on evaluating the impact of cognitive dissonance on negative attitudes towards victims. To do this, we compared the three groups on the negative attitudes towards victims measure (victim blame and derogation).

An analysis of variance revealed a significant effect of the negative attitudes towards victims, $F(2, 170) = 15.13$ $p < .001$ $\eta^2 = .153$. Bonferroni post hoc tests revealed that participants in the cognitive Dissonance Induction condition ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 0.97$)

reported less negative attitudes towards victims than participants both in the Control condition ($M = 3.42$ $SD = 1.12$) $p < .001$ $d = .65$ $g = .63$ [1.02,0.24] and in the Awareness Induction condition ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.43$) $p < .001$ $d = 1.38$ $g = 1.43$ [1.89,0.98].

Furthermore, Control ($M = 3.42$ $SD = 1.13$) and Awareness Induction ($M = 3.77$ $SD = .43$) conditions did not significantly differ from each other, $p = .101$ $g = 0.38$ [0.7,0.03] (see Table 2)². The finding that awareness of BJW did not differ from being unaware of it, showed that raising awareness alone did not alter the response to the innocent victim in the scenario.

² As in study one, the same power sensitivity analysis was performed. Results determined that our design could detect f values of 0.24 (or about $r = .22$ or Cohen's $D = 0.45$) with 80% power.

Table 2. Means for negative attitudes towards victims in each condition

	N	Mean	SD
Control Condition	76	3.42 _a	1.13
Dissonance Induction	41	2.73 _b	.98
Awareness Induction Only	54	3.77 _a	.43

Note: Lower scores indicate less negative attitudes. Means in the same column that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .001$

Discussion Study 2

We could not be sure after Study 1 whether significant differences in Victim Blaming between the Dissonance Induction and the Awareness condition were the result of reduced negativity following dissonance or an increase following raising awareness. Study 2 helped answer this question. The findings demonstrated that Dissonance Induction generated reduction in negative attitudes towards victims, while the fact that the Awareness condition did not differ from the Control condition showed that awareness only did not affect victim blaming, let alone increase it. Cognitive dissonance induction appears to have made participants feel guilty about blaming the victim, which inhibited the subsequent blaming of the victim (negative attitudes towards victims). Thus Study 2 added support for the core hypothesis in Study 1 and clarified that indeed dissonance generates the main effect in the studies.

General Discussion

People commonly blame victims of crime, violence, or accidents for the harm they have experienced. This is the result of the common (biased) belief that in a ‘just

world' (BJW) people get what they deserve (Lerner, 1980). Often this leads to secondary harm for innocent victims (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Two experimental studies inducing cognitive dissonance using the hypocrisy paradigm (Aronson, 1991; Son Hing et al., 2002) addressed this issue attempting to reduce this undesirable mechanism in response to a car accident scenario. The results showed that participants blamed and derogated victims less if they were: (a) asked to confirm that they supported just treatment for innocent victims (b) were made aware of the BJW bias, and after this (c) were asked to recall their own negative treatment of innocent victims in the past. The last step generated dissonance (hypocrisy) to which participants responded with reduced negative attitudes to an innocent victim. Participants in a comparison group in which this confrontation was omitted showed significantly higher negativity towards innocent victims. Importantly, a control group which was not made aware of the BJW bias nor were asked to reflect on their own experiences of blaming victims showed the same response as this control group. Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) suggests that the inconsistency between past negative attitudes to victims and the expressed support for the principle of just treatment of victims in the present, leads to discomfort which is reduced by participants through expressing themselves in less negative ways about victims. Essential is the realisation that for the reduction of negative attitudes towards innocent victims to occur, support for just treatment of victims and mere awareness of the way the justice motive operates is not enough. Individuals need to experience cognitive dissonance about it – they have to be made aware that they themselves have in the past treated innocent victims unfairly.

In terms of potential for the use of this principle in interventions, the findings highlight that campaigns to only raise awareness of the plight of victims may not achieve what the campaigners intend. Only when it implicates the audience in the realisation that they

too may have been guilty of blaming innocent victims should we expect the impact these campaigns are hoping for. Application of the findings of the studies in this manner suggests a rethinking of the design of campaigns to raise awareness of domestic abuse, sexual abuse, racism, dangerous driving etc. Nonetheless, some cautionary comments need to be made. While the hypocrisy principle has been shown to be effective in many studies (Aronson et al. 1991; de Vries et al. 2015), a confrontation with a person's recognition of their own history of potential abusive tendencies, racial discrimination, sexual risk taking, or traffic violations etc. may not always have the desired outcome. The more serious the trespasses involved, the more likely it is that the recipient may not change behaviour or attitudes but reduce or prevent the resulting dissonance without reducing the inconsistency (McGrath, 2017). In short, a rethinking of victim awareness campaigns based on the dissonance induction mechanism needs to include avoiding a defensive reaction which might lead to undesirable dissonance reduction approaches, such as denial, ignoring, shifts in attention, trivialization, justifications, etc. (McGrath, 2017). While the present studies have shown that dissonance reduction can lead to favourable attitude change towards innocent victims, it is by no means guaranteed that this will pertain to other scenarios. It is evident that more research needs to be done and that the impact of campaigns or other interventions that make use of the dissonance mechanism needs to be scrutinised in more detail. In particular, the conditions for behavioural or attitude change versus the undesirable dissonance reduction methods mentioned above (de Vries & Timmins, 2016) requires further investigation.

Finally, at an equally fundamental level we need to examine the pros and cons of a population driven by the BJW bias. The negative consequences of the belief in a just world/justice motive for secondary victimization have been widely studied (Hafer &

Begue, 2005 for a review). What has been studied far less are the processes that can prevent negative consequences of the BJW. Some authors have argued that BJW perceptions are crucial for well-being and a cornerstone of the outlook on life for many people (Dalbert, 2001). Trying to convince them that the BJW is a delusion may have a more far-reaching impact than is ethical and desirable in psychological research and might put participants subjective well-being at risk (Hafer et al., 2020). It would be like dropping a bomb that would shatter a core believe which would change their perspective on the world in general. So far, the present approach seems to be a safe way to initiate a reduction in negative attitudes towards innocent victims, without attempting to affect the core beliefs of the individuals. This principle needs to be taken into account in further efforts to research this matter in ethical fashion.

Of course, the present studies have some limitations, mostly related with being performed in specific experimental conditions. Although we may be reasonably sure about the causal link between dissonance induction and the reduction of negative attitudes towards innocent victims, there is a need to replicate our results with different participants and different operationalizations of primary victimization (besides the car accident scenario presented). However, given that previous studies have shown the generalizability of the negative consequences of the justice motive for negative attitudes towards victims (Hafer & Bègue, 2005, for a review), it stands to reason that the results can be replicated in future studies. Another limitation is related to not knowing how long the obtained effect may last. This is particularly relevant for the use of this principle in interventions. At present we do not know whether the generated attitude change lasts beyond the duration of the study. Future studies should try to address these unanswered issues.

To conclude, the two studies have opened up a promising avenue of research that has the potential to protect victims from secondary victimisation. As has been demonstrated, this can be done by inducing dissonance around past experiences of blaming victims resulting in the subsequent reduction of further negative perspectives on innocent victims. The use of this hypocrisy paradigm can conceivably be operationalised in real-life situations and thus contribute to a more supportive response to victims in society, while at the same time preserving the justice motive that contributes to individuals following the rules of good citizenship and living happy lives.

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Appendix 1. Justice motive Information and its consequences

In some occasions, people are faced with situations of injustice that are beyond their own control and that directly challenge the belief that people have that the world is a just place. For example, innocent, caring, hardworking people or children die in traffic accidents, have fatal diseases, lose their jobs or suffer misfortunes. The question is, in what way do we face these situations that escape from the laws of justice and equity? How do we manage the many occasions in which people do not receive what they really deserve?

The social psychologist Melvin J. Lerner and several social psychologists (e.g., Callan et al., 2009; Correia et al., 2001) have shown that, on many occasions, people develop strategies to make these unfair situations to be perceived as fair, and thus avoid the discomfort that the situation of injustice produces in us (and this produces a distortion/bias in the perception of the situation). How do we do it? One strategy is that we reinterpret the suffering of the victim as deserving of their own misfortune. The people who suffer injustice are in some way deserving of it and, on the contrary, the people who have positive things happening to them are in some way deserving of it. For example: If a good and hardworking person tells us that she/he got fired, this situation causes us discomfort because in some way it is unfair. According to this psychological strategy studied by Lerner, we would make a reinterpretation of the situation: "maybe he is not as hard-working as he claimed to be ..." "he will have done something ..."

These thoughts make the unjust situation be perceived more fairly.

What is your opinion about this text? Please highlight the main ideas:

Appendix 2. Dissonance Induction

Please, write about two situations in which you have blamed a victim for their misfortune, to reduce the discomfort of facing an unfair situation. For example, thinking “given that happened, he or she must have done something”. Think about it (minimum 100 words). As we have already mentioned, this study is completely anonymous.