

When a Generally Valued Discourse is Unwelcome: The Case
of Belief in a General Expression by a (Fictitious) Member
of the Finance Elite

Quando um Discurso Geralmente Valorizado Não é Bem-Vindo:
O Caso da Expressão da Crença Num Mundo Geral Justo por
Um Membro (Fictício) da Elite Financeira

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ABSTRACT

We aim to show that an idea that is generally valued (“just world”) when expressed by ordinary people becomes paradoxically a sign of immorality when expressed by the finance elite. Participants from Portugal and Spain read the fictitious case (inspired by real events) of “George M.”, a stereotypical member of the finance elite. Participants randomly read that the target had expressed the idea that the world is fair or unfair to people in general. Then, they indicated how immoral the target was and how much they wished him various outcomes. Comparing the target who expressed “the world is not just”, the one who expressed “the world is just” was judged as more immoral. Higher immoral judgements predicted higher wishes of negative outcomes. These results advise the elite against using moralizing discourses, which are likely to backfire.

Keywords: Belief in a just world; elits; perceived immorality; moralizing discourses; punishments.

JEL Classification: C90; C91; Y80.

RESUMO

Pretendemos mostrar que uma ideia geralmente valorizada (“mundo justo”), nomeadamente no contexto financeiro, quando expressa por pessoas comuns, se torna paradoxalmente num sinal de imoralidade quando expressa pela elite financeira. Participantes de Portugal e Espanha leram o caso fictício (inspirado em acontecimentos reais) de “George M.”, um membro estereotípico da elite financeira. Aleatoriamente os participantes leram que o alvo

teria exprimido a ideia de que o mundo é justo ou injusto para as pessoas em geral, avaliaram a sua imoralidade e indicaram quanto lhe desejavam um conjunto de acontecimentos. Comparando o alvo que exprimiu “mundo não justo”, o que exprimiu “mundo justo” foi avaliado como mais imoral. Este julgamento predisse maiores desejos de acontecimentos negativos. Estes resultados desaconselham o recurso, por parte da elite, a discursos moralizadores que terão o efeito oposto ao pretendido.

Palavras-chave: Crença num mundo justo; elites; imoralidade percebida; discursos moralizantes; punições.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The “belief in a just world” (BJW) has been used as a metaphor for an implicit and motivated reasoning, according to which “people get what they deserve and deserve what they get” (Lerner and Simmons, 1966: 204). The BJW leads individuals to perceive peoples’ lives as fair, their own included, which is fundamental for their subjective wellbeing (Correia and Vala, 2004). The BJW reflects a naive immanent justice view (Callan et al., 2014) containing a moralising component.

This moralising component, which is transmitted through various means, from fairy tales to educational and professional organizations (Deconchy, 2011; Jose, 1990; Lerner, 1980), teaches individuals that “good people” and their actions are systematically rewarded whilst “bad people” and their actions are systematically punished. Within an economically liberal logic, in which “social utility” is valued, that moralising component can be metaphorically translated as a specific lesson. According to that lesson, individuals judged as having “social utility” (e.g., being industrious, autonomous, entrepreneurial; Beauvois and Dépret, 2008) ought to and will thrive. On the contrary, individuals lacking “social utility” (e.g., being lazy, dependent) ought not to and will not thrive. In Western economically liberal societies and contexts at least, the BJW thus serves as a mechanism that justifies that economic system and inequality (e.g., Jost and Kay, 2010).

The research we present in this article is part of a larger project on the effects of moralizing discourses/narratives by elites. We will thus *not* focus on the BJW as a motivation to perceive events and social arrangements as just. Instead, we will focus on the *expression* of the “belief in a general just world” (henceforth, general BJW; Dalbert et al., 1987). The expression of general BJW centres on the idea of deservingness in the lives of people in general (in contrast to the “belief in a personal just world”, which is about deservingness in people’s own lives; Dalbert, 1999).

We focused on general BJW because this was a constitutive element of various moralising narratives used by the political and the finance elites to justify the implementation of austerity measures in Europe after the 2008 crisis. For instance, these elites used the argument, originally put forward by the International Monetary Fund in 2008, according to which the Portuguese and other Southern European countries had been living beyond their means (Dinis and Pereira, 2015; Santos, 2013; for other narratives [and associated metaphors], see Caldas, 2013; Coelho, 2013; Krugman, 1996). Through the “beyond their means” narrative, elites blamed the populations’ alleged wasteful past behaviour for their suffering (i.e., the effects of austerity). This suffering and the measures underlying it were thus communicated as just, whilst also seemingly aiming to teach those populations how they should behave in the future.

Our main goal was to ascertain whether the expression of general BJW by the finance elite is positively or negatively valued. As we will argue later, when such individuals express the idea that people get what they deserve (high general BJW), they are more devalued – specifically, judged as more immoral – than when they express the idea that individuals do not get what they deserve (low general BJW). As we review next, this contrasts with past research findings on the expression of general BJW by ordinary citizens.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. THE SOCIAL VALUE OF GENERAL BELIEF IN A JUST WORLD EXPRESSION

Research focusing on the expression of general BJW by ordinary individuals has found that it has social value or credit. Indeed, studies conducted with Portuguese university students and with employed and unemployed French citizens show that individuals know that the expression of high general BJW can be a source of positive social value (Alves and Correia, 2008; 2010a; 2010b; Gangloff and Duchon, 2010; Gangloff and Mazilescu, 2015; but see Testé and Perrin, 2013). Individuals use that knowledge to strategically convey specific images of themselves and to evaluate other people. Indeed, participants in these studies used higher general BJW when asked to convey positive images of themselves and used lower general BJW when asked to convey negative images of themselves. They also judged people who expressed high general BJW more positively than people who expressed low general BJW. Specifically, participants judged individuals expressing high versus low general BJW as having more characteristics associated with social utility or market value in economically liberal societies or contexts (e.g., Beauvois and Dépret, 2008; Cambon, 2006).

Indeed, in studies conducted in France, Germany and Portugal, Alves et al. (2018) showed that the expression of general BJW is especially approved of (or prescriptively normative, Cialdini and Trost, 1998) in at least one prototypical context associated with the finance sector, specifically a bank. In their Study 1, Alves et al. (2018) asked participants to imagine themselves in job interviews in four professional contexts (a bank, a union, a Human Rights NGO or an institution that promotes employability of people with intellectual disability). Participants were then asked to indicate what they would say in each context to convey a positive image of themselves to their prospective employers. Results showed that participants would express higher general BJW to convey a positive image at a bank than in the other contexts. In Study 2, Alves et al. (2018) asked participants to judge individuals who expressed either high or low general BJW during job applications in the same contexts. Individuals expressing high versus low general BJW were judged more positively and as more deserving of the job when they were applying at a bank. Mirroring Study 1's results, this pattern was reversed in the other contexts.

Although the aforementioned research has provided insights as to the judged normativity of general BJW, it has only used “ordinary individuals” as targets of judgments. If expressing high versus general BJW has more social value in contexts associated with finance sector, does it imply that all social actors associated with that context reap the benefits of expressing high general BJW? Up to now research has not tackled the likely and paradoxical possibility that individuals devalue the expression of general BJW, when expressed by members of the finance elite. The research we present in this article presents the first study aiming to address that limitation.

2.2. THE FINANCE ELITE AND THE EXPRESSION OF GENERAL BELIEF IN A JUST WORLD

Contrary to what used to happen decades ago, members of the finance elite are no longer judged as respectable citizens (Moohr, 2014). Regardless of whether or not only a minority of the finance elite engaged in highly publicized white-collar crimes (e.g., the 2008 cases of Lehman Brothers and Bernie Madoff), in general those individuals are stereotypically judged as white-collar criminals in a process resembling “stigma by association” (Goffman, 1963/1990). For instance, they are perceived as greedy, selfish and remorseless “bad apples” – that is, immoral individuals – who attract outrage and revenge wishes from the average citizen (Cullen et al., 2009).

Being a moralising discourse, the expression of high BJW by someone who is stereotypically judged as immoral is likely to be seen as a sign of their immorality, for instance of their hypocrisy or aloofness regarding other people’s suffering. Despite the fact that in economically liberal contexts the expression of high general BJW is normative and that of low general BJW is counter-normative, members of the finance elite can thus be paradoxically expected to be targets of even more negative judgments when they express the former rather than the latter. If that is the case, individuals are also likely to wish these sort of representatives of the finance sector positive and negative outcomes to a lesser and higher extent, respectively. The latter may even involve life and death or health-related wishes, which are usually counter-normative/illegitimate, at least when their targets are ordinary individuals.

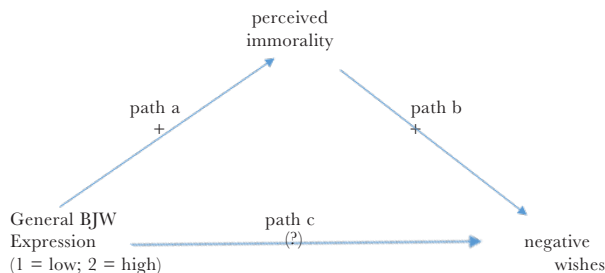
With the study we present in this article, we thus aimed to address the following questions for the first time: Does the expression of general BJW, which is especially valued in economically liberal contexts when enacted by ordinary individuals, become judged as immoral when enacted by finance elite members? Does it make individuals more prone to wish those elite members negative outcomes?

3. HYPOTHESIS

Our hypothesis is represented in Figure 1: the expression of high versus low general BJW by a member of the finance elite will lead to higher immorality judgments (path a) which, in turn, will predict higher negative outcomes wishes (path b). In other words, we predicted an indirect effect of expressed general BJW on negative outcomes wishes (henceforth, “negative wishes”) via judged immorality of the target.

In this line of research this is the first study to present an elite member as a target of participants’ judgments. It is also the first study to measure participants’ wishes towards someone. For these reasons, we explored whether or not there are significant direct effects between the expression of general BJW and negative wishes (path c).

Figure 1: Visual representation of the hypothesised relation between general BJW and negative wishes via perceived immorality



4. PARTICIPANTS

One hundred thirty-seven university students took part in this study¹. Of these, 97 were Spaniards (41 males, 55 females, one unreported; $M_{\text{age}} = 22.61$, $SD = 4.01$) and 40 were Portuguese (26 males, 14 females; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.00$, $SD = 4.67$).

4.1. METHOD

4.1.1. EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

The study has a unifactorial design with two levels: expression of high versus low general BJW.

4.1.2. PROCEDURE

The experimenter invited participants to take part in the study during class time. The experimenter was not their teacher. They were assured that their participation was voluntary and anonymous and that they could give up at any time without having to explain their choice. Finally, they were told that those who decided to take part in the study should do so in silence, without looking at their peers' answers, and that at the end they would be fully debriefed as to the goals of the study. The experimenter then randomly distributed the study among the participants.

On the first page participants were thanked for accepting to take part in the study and were told that they were going to read about "George M." and some interview excerpts with him for a British TV channel. The text about George M. comprised stereotypical behaviours of the finance elite and similar events that have received high publicity in mass media (e.g.,

¹ As aforementioned, this study has various novelties. Therefore, we did not know what effect sizes of paths a and b to expect. As a result, we could not estimate the number of participants needed prior to conducting our study. Furthermore, our data collection was dependent on participant availability. Our sample, however, has an adequate number of participants. According to Fritz and MacKinnon (2007), researchers need 116 participants to detect a significant indirect/mediated effect (.80 power) when $0.39 < \text{path a} < 0.59$ and $0.26 < \text{path b} < 0.39$, as is our case.

Eisinger, 2014) or shown in films (e.g., “The big short”, Gardner, Kleiner, Milchan, Pitt, & McKay, 2015). This was done to enhance the chances that George M. and the negative social consequences of his actions would be close to the prototypical perceptions of the finance sector elite. Specifically, we portrayed George M. as working for an important British bank. His so called “creative accounting” allowed the bank to cash in millions of pounds, which rewarded him generously in productivity bonuses. After authorities found this out, the bank shares plummeted. Nevertheless, George M. was promoted at the bank and further offered millions of pounds in productivity bonus, whilst thousands of people around the world lost their jobs. Although authorities accused him of fraud, he was not condemned due to a technicality. That page ended with the sentence: “These are some excerpts of the interview with him:”.

On the second page, participants read three excerpts of a bogus 50-minute interview with George M. The “interview excerpts” were actually the Portuguese or Spanish translations of the personal BJW scale items (Dalbert, 1999) adapted to “people in general”. In order to increase believability we added several expressions to emulate oral speech (“that’s it”; “for instance”; “it’s like I said before”). According to the experimental condition, participants randomly read that George M. had said that people generally get what they deserve (high general BJW) or that people rarely get what they deserve (low general BJW). The “excerpts” were preceded by “minute 10, 26 and 43” to indicate that “George M.” had expressed high or low general BJW at different times during the “interview”, not in a row. We operationalized high [low] general BJW expression as in Alves and Correia (2010a):

“(Minute 10) I think that people generally [rarely] get what they deserve: Overall, events in people’s lives are [not] just... That’s it: I believe that most of the things that happen in people’s lives are [not] fair, that they usually [rarely] deserve what happens to them. (...) (Minute 26) “People are usually [rarely] treated fairly, for instance, I think that important decisions that are made concerning people are usually [seldom] just.” (...) (Minute 43) “It’s like I said before, in people’s lives injustice [justice] is the exception rather than the rule.”

After reading the texts about “George M.”, participants judged how immoral they thought he was (third page)² and indicated to what extent they wished him a serious of positive and negative outcomes (fourth page). After all participants had finished responding, the experimenter thanked them, debriefed them as to the goals of the study and answered their questions.

² On this page there were other items that were included for exploratory purposes only (e.g., “George M. deserved being promoted.”; “George M. was aware of the consequences of his actions.”).

4.1.3. MEASURES

4.1.3.1. PERCEIVED IMMORALITY

We measured this variable with the item: “George M. seems to be an unscrupulous person.” Participants responded on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = I totally disagree; 7 = I totally agree).

4.1.3.2. NEGATIVE OUTCOMES WISHES (17 ITEMS; $\alpha = .93$)

We created 17 items to measure the extent to which participants wished George M. a series of outcomes. The items comprised negative and positive wishes pertaining to various life domains (e.g., success, interpersonal relationships; the full list of items can be consulted in the Appendix). We aggregated the 17 items, after reversing the positive wishes, in order to get an index of negative outcomes wishes (as a proxy of punishment wishes)³. Participants responded on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = not at all; 7 = very much).

5. RESULTS

In order to test for the indirect effect of perceived immorality in the relation between general BJW expression and negative wishes, we used Model 4 of Process macro (version 2.16; Hayes, 2013) and asked for 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI) with 10,000 bootstrap resamples⁴.

As predicted, the relation between general BJW expression and outcomes wishes via judged immorality of the target was significant, as the confidence interval does not include zero⁵: $b = 0.18$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.39]. Specifically, as predicted, the expression

³ In a pilot study with 429 Portuguese and Spanish university students, we ran an exploratory factorial analysis which yielded three factors with eigenvalues > 1 accounting for 62.79% of variance: negative socio-economic wishes, positive socio-economic wishes, physical consequences wishes. We decided to aggregate the 17 items into a single index, because exploratory analyses indicated that we would arrive at the same conclusions with separate analyses for each factor. In footnote 5 we nevertheless indicate the values of the indirect effects for each factor. The interested reader can obtain more details of these analyses from the first author.

⁴ This macro allows researchers to calculate statistical mediation without having to assume a normal distribution of the variables. It calculates bias-corrected confidence intervals for indirect/mediation effects through a number of bootstrap resamples (usually, 5,000 or 10,000). The indirect effect is the product of path a by path b. The macro provides a point estimate and a CI for the effects. Effects are interpreted as “significant” if zero is not in the CIs. There are a number of predetermined models, and Model 4 is the one to be used when there is just one “mediator” (in our case, “judged immorality”). Note that, contrary to the “causal steps approach” by Baron and Kenny (1986), this approach does not require path c to be significant.

⁵ When we calculated indirect effects for each factor of negative wishes, we arrived at the same conclusions: (negative socio-economic wishes; $Grand\ Mean = 3.19$, $SD = 1.49$): $b = 0.25$, $SE = 0.12$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.50]; (positive socio-economic wishes; $Grand\ Mean = 2.63$, $SD = 1.20$): $b = -0.18$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI [-0.40, -0.02]; (physical consequences wishes; $Grand\ Mean = 1.74$, $SD = 1.24$): $b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.30]. Note that while the indirect effect is positive for negative socio-economic and physical consequences wishes (positive relations in paths a

of general BJW (1 = low, 2 = high) led to higher perceived immorality of the target (path a), $b = 0.53$, $SE = 0.27$, 95% CI [0.01, 1.06]. In other words, participants judged the target as more immoral when he expressed high rather than low general BJW ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.19$ versus $M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.83$, respectively). T-tests for one sample comparing each mean value against 4 (the midpoint of the scale) indicated that both mean values were above it, $t_{\text{highBJW}}(70) = 9.79$, $p < .001$; $t_{\text{lowBJW}}(65) = 3.56$, $p = .001$. Joining the two results, we conclude that participants judged both targets as immoral, with the target who expressed high general BJW being judged as even more so than the target who expressed low general BJW. Also as expected, perceived immorality significantly predicted negative wishes (path b), $b = 0.34$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.22, 0.47]. Specifically, higher perceived immorality predicted higher negative wishes.

The direct effect from general BJW expression to negative wishes was nonsignificant (path c) $b = -0.36$, $SE = 0.18$, 95% CI [-0.71, 0.01]. This means that expressing high or low general BJW per se did not lead participants to wish the target negative wishes to a different degree: *Grand Mean* = 3.74, $SD = 1.18$.

Finally, given that our sample comprises participants from Portugal and Spain, we explored whether there were any significant differences involving their nationality. We thus conducted two 2 (general BJW expression: high/low) X 2 (nationality: Portuguese/Spanish) ANOVAs: one on judged immorality and another on negative wishes. Neither the nationality main effects nor its interactions with expressed general BJW were significant at the .05 level (all $F_s[1, 133] = 0.45$, $p_s \geq .50$, $\eta^2_{ps} \leq .003$).

6. DISCUSSION

Past research on the expression of general BJW showed that, overall, saying that people generally get what they deserve and deserve what they get grants (ordinary) speakers positive social value, namely that associated with market value in economically liberal societies/contexts (e.g., Alves and Correia, 2010a; Gangloff and Mazilescu, 2015). Furthermore, research has also shown that this effect is specific to contexts associated with the finance sector, where expressing the idea that people get what they deserve is prescriptively normative whereas expressing the opposite idea is counter-normative (Alves et al., 2018).

In the study reported here, participants read about “George M.”, an alleged member of the finance elite. Our aim was to show for the first time that expressing general BJW in an economically liberal context can be paradoxically a source of moral devaluation by outsiders, at least when the speaker is presented as a stereotypical member of that elite. Reflecting immorality associated with those individuals, our results show that, on average, “George M.” is indeed judged as immoral, regardless of whether he expresses high or low general BJW. Importantly, as predicted, when the target expresses high versus low general BJW, he is judged as even more immoral. In turn, higher immorality judgements predict higher negative wishes.

and b), it is negative for positive socio-economic wishes (positive effect in path a and a negative effect in path b). The interested reader may obtain more detailed information from the first author.

The aforementioned patterns may stem from different sources. For instance, they may reflect the fact that individuals who are perceived as immoral but resort to a moralising discourse are likely judged as especially hypocritical. Another possibility is that the expression of high general BJW by elite members may be a sign that they and ordinary citizens inhabit metaphorically different worlds, with different moral rules and justice criteria. This is an especially upsetting possibility.

Indeed, the wide media coverage of finance scandals after the 2008 crisis likely resulted in those elite members being perceived as not only unaccountable culprits for it but also as reaping benefits from it (Eisinger, 2014). Nevertheless, the “different worlds” account suggests that the elite are perceived as actually believing that this state of affairs is just. When such individuals resort to a general BJW discourse, they are likely interpreted as implying that those who lose deserve their losses, and those who win deserve their rewards. In that context, this is a system-justifying, thus protective, discourse (Alves et al., 2018). Ironically, however, instead of protecting that system, the expression of general BJW by finance elite members backfires and likely leads to moral outrage among those outside that circle. Consistent with that, in a qualitative study conducted in Greece (Vavvos and Triliva, 2018: 324), one interviewee referred to the elite members who used the “beyond the means” narrative in these terms: “And the fury I feel...the fury is personal... I want him, him, him to pay for the crime they committed to me, to my family, to my mother, to my father, to my friend, and to my neighbour (...).”

We did not measure participants’ moral outrage in our study (nor asked the extent to which they felt affected by the crisis). Nevertheless, our results suggest that higher moral outrage towards the target who expresses high versus low general BJW may have played a role in our participants’ responses. Indeed, they wished the target who expressed high versus low general BJW more negative outcomes which, we must not forget, include personal injury. As we stressed in the procedure section of this article, we described “George M.” in such a way that he could be perceived as a sort of “representative” of current economically liberal system, specifically its financial sector. This raises the likely possibility that by considering “George M.” as immoral, participants actually judged the perceived functioning of that economic system as such (just as the participant in Vavvos and Triliva, 2018’s study seems to be doing).

Despite believing this is an important first study on the effects of moralizing discourses by elites, we must acknowledge several limitations that should be addressed in the future. First, “George M.” was presented in such a way as to reflect current stereotypes of the finance elite and its functioning. Future studies should also present the case of a member of that elite without directly mentioning such representations. If those studies get similar results, there will be stronger evidence for the fact that moralising discourses/narratives backfire when enacted by elite members. Second, our immorality measure only has one item. Future studies should include richer measures which distinguish various everyday categories of (im)morality (e.g., Phalet and Poppe, 1997). This will allow researchers to identify which categories better predict negative wishes towards the elite. Third, as stated previously, we did not measure participants’ moral outrage towards the target. Nevertheless, it would be important to include this variable in future studies. Based on the review by Miller (2001),

we expect it to be a more proximal variable predicting negative wishes. Finally, samples of future studies should not be restricted to university students.

Despite these limitations, we believe that this study is a valuable first contribution to warn the elites against the use of certain discourses/narratives that may backfire against them. Turning to our case, general BJW expression may have been a convenient and comfortable device to convey the ideas the elite(s) wished to communicate and justify (e.g., the implementation of austerity measures). Nevertheless, the public opinion might perceive moral narratives grounded on the BJW as unjust and offensive when they are used by elite members of. If we are right, this might partially explain the growing disaffection of ample sectors of the population toward the finance and political elites (Ernst et al., 2017). From our point of view, this should worry current elites and motivate them to reflect upon the use of narratives felt as unjust and offensive.

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APPENDIX

List of items used to measure outcomes wishes:

1. Que tenha morte com sofrimento prolongado.
2. Que venha a ficar na pobreza.
3. Que esteja rodeado de pessoas que gostem dele. (R)
4. Que se sinta só durante toda a sua vida.
5. Que ganhe o euromilhões. (R)
6. Que a sua mulher o abandone.
7. Que venha a ser preso por um delito que não tenha cometido.
8. Que consiga atingir os objectivos que traçou para a sua vida. (R)
9. Que seja feliz em toda a sua vida. (R)
10. Que não tenha amigos.
11. Que apanhe uma doença que o leve a sofrer.
12. Que no trabalho falem com ele apenas o mínimo indispensável.
13. Que tenha problemas com o Fisco, mesmo que seja por um erro dos serviços.
14. Que tenha um acidente, no qual fique desfigurado.
15. Que leve uma surra das grandes.
16. Que chegue a presidente do banco. (R)
17. Que tenha muitos amigos. (R)

Note: The letter “R” indicates items which were reverse-coded before being included in the negative outcomes wishes index.

The three factors identified in the pilot study (see footnote 3) were: “negative socio-economic wishes” (items 2, 4, 6, 7, 10, 12, 13), “positive socio-economic wishes” (items 3, 5, 8, 9, 16, 17) and “physical consequences wishes” (items 1, 11, 14, 15).