

WE BELIEVE PEOPLE GET WHAT THEY DESERVE

MELVIN LERNER (1929–)

IN CONTEXT

APPROACH

Attribution theory

BEFORE

1958 Austrian psychologist Fritz Heider investigates the attribution process, or how people judge the factors that influence a situation.

1965 American psychologists Edward E. Jones and Keith Davis argue that the goal of attribution is to discover how behavior and intention reveal a person's basic nature.

AFTER

1971 US sociologist William J. Ryan coins the phrase "victim blaming," exposing how it is used to justify racism and social injustice.

1975 American psychologists Zick Rubin and Letitia Peplau find that firm believers in a "Just World" tend to be more authoritarian, more religious, and more admiring of existing social and political institutions.

People want to believe that they live in a safe, stable, and orderly world...

...where "bad" things only happen to "bad" people, and only "good" things happen to "good" people.

People operate under the assumption that "people get what they deserve" and deserve what they get.

People blame the **victims of misfortune** in order to protect themselves from feeling **vulnerable**.

People are most comfortable when they have a sense of control over their lives. We need to believe that we live in a world where the good are rewarded and the bad are punished, and this contributes significantly to our sense that it is possible to predict, guide, and ultimately control events. This "Just-World hypothesis" is a tendency to believe that "people get what they deserve." But, according to Melvin Lerner, this is a dangerous misconception

that places undue importance on the supposed character traits of the people involved rather than on the actual facts of a situation. If someone is suffering or being punished, we find it easier to believe that that person must have done something to deserve such treatment. The Just-World theory becomes a comforting rationalization of seemingly inexplicable events, and stops the world from appearing chaotic or random. It also allows people to believe that as long as

See also: Dorothy Rowe 154 ■ Elizabeth Loftus 202-07



Homelessness, like many other social problems, is much easier to tolerate or be indifferent to, if you believe that people are ultimately responsible for their own misfortunes.

they are "good," only "good" things will happen to them, generating a false sense of safety and control.

In his book, *The Belief in a Just World*, Lerner argued that we ask children to "be good" and promise them that in return for effectively putting their natural impulses and desires to one side, they will be rewarded in the future. For this contract to be fulfilled, we must

live in a just world; and so children grow into adults with this belief firmly in place.

Victim-blaming

In a 1965 study, Lerner found that students who were told that a fellow student had won the lottery rationalized this event by believing that the winner must have worked harder than his peers. It seems that belief in a Just World allows people to adjust the facts of a situation. This can be especially damaging when applied to the way we might view victims of crime or abuse. In rape cases, for example, it is often suggested that the female victim was "asking for it" because she wore a short skirt or was flirtatious, effectively absolving the perpetrator of responsibility and placing it in the hands of the victim. By blaming the victim, outsiders also protect their own sense of safety.

Lerner did emphasize, however, that belief in a Just World does not always lead to victim-blaming. The seeming innocence, attractiveness, status, and degree of similarity of

the victim to those assessing them can affect whether or not people are held responsible for their misfortune.

Lerner's hypothesis became the foundation of important research into social justice. It also sparked debate over the effects of a Just-World approach to life. Does it help people stand up to difficulties? It may instead stimulate the feeling that any wrongdoing, however minor or unintentional, leads to disaster—a belief that Australian psychologist Dorothy Rowe has suggested can lead to an increased susceptibility to depression. ■

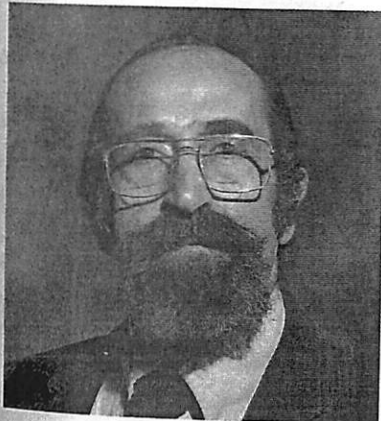
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People need to believe they live in a Just World.

Melvin Lerner

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Melvin Lerner



A pioneer of the psychological study of justice, Melvin Lerner studied social psychology at New York University, receiving his doctorate in 1957. He then moved to Stanford University, California, where he studied for his post-doctorate in clinical psychology.

From 1970 to 1994, Lerner taught social psychology at the University of Waterloo in Canada. He has also lectured at a number of universities in the US and Europe, including the University of California, Washington University, and the universities of Utrecht and Leiden in the Netherlands.

Lerner was editor of the journal *Social Justice Research*, and in 2008 was given a Lifetime Achievement Award by the International Society for Justice Research. He is a visiting scholar at Florida Atlantic University.

Key works

1980 *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion*
1981 *The Justice Motive in Social Behavior: Adapting to Times of Scarcity and Change*
1996 *Current Concerns about Social Justice*