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THE WORLD MAY NOT BE JUST

The world may not be just but you'd better not say it: On the social value of expressing
personal belief in a just world

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Abstract

The expression of personal belief in a just world (PBJW) has been discussed as a criterion of excellence in social judgments. In four experimental studies we hypothesized and found that targets who express high versus low PBJW are judged as more: 1) deserving of success and 2) suited to socio-organizational expectations. The four studies show that suitability to socio-organizational expectations mediates the relation between PBJW expressed and success deservingness, even after controlling for judgments of likability, status, rationality, optimism and targets as victims. Studies 2 and 3 show this pattern occurs regardless of target performance appraisal. Study 4 indicates that expressing low PBJW decreases the social value of individuals, but expressing high PBJW does not increase it. We discuss the impact of PBJW expression on people's lives, namely on upper social mobility of members of low-status groups, and the influence of the negativity bias on judgments caused by PBJW expression.

Keywords: personal belief in a just world; judgment norms; social value; success; deservingness

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The world may not be just but you'd better not say it: On the social value of expressing personal belief in a just world

Although most people recognize that life and social systems are not fair, and that prejudice and discrimination exist, paradoxically they do not take kindly to those who complain against discrimination (Kaiser & Major, 2006) or stand against the status quo (Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008). Pretending that everything is just, or remaining silent about injustices, thus seems to be an important feature of social life. Consistent with this idea, individuals who say their lives are just are typically judged more positively than those who say their lives are unjust (Alves & Correia, 2008; Testé & Perrin, 2013). Specifically, targets who express high versus low Personal Belief in a Just World (PBJW; Dalbert, 1999) are judged as more likable and, especially, as having more potential for success.

The explanation for the value attached to **the** expression of PBJW has rested on the idea that relatively powerful people and society at large require and expect their subordinates and members to display such discourse, because it legitimates social arrangements (Alves & Correia, 2008, 2013; Testé, Maisonneuve, Assilaméhou, & Perrin, 2012; Testé & Perrin, 2013). Nevertheless, this theoretical assumption has not been tested yet. Furthermore, by focusing on targets' potential for success, research on the social value of PBJW has neglected a central concept in just world theory – that of deservingness (Lerner, 1977, 1980). In four experimental studies we tested for the first time whether targets who express high versus low PBJW are judged as more deserving of success through judgements of higher suitability to socio-organizational expectations.

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The BJW as an Individual Motivation and the Expression of the BJW as a Socially Motivated Discourse

According to a well-known metaphor in the just world literature, in childhood most individuals make a “personal contract” which they uphold throughout their lives (Lerner, 1977). Children give up immediate gratification and strive to reach long-term goals (e.g., wealth, status, prestige) in socially sanctioned ways. In return, they expect to be rewarded accordingly. In order to have confidence in this contract, individuals develop a “belief in a just world” (BJW). Through the BJW individuals naively and non-consciously expect good or bad things to happen to people according to what they deserve (Lerner, 1980).

Cognitively the BJW is anchored *inter alia* on an immanent justice reasoning (Callan, Sutton, Harvey, & Dawtry, 2014), and it allows individuals to confidently pursue their long-term goals with subjective certainty that they will succeed in attaining them (Bal & Van den Bos, 2012; Hafer, 2000). The BJW becomes a guiding principle in people’s lives, such that by striving for their goals individuals feel entitled to them.

Since the BJW is so important to individuals, they defend it from contradictory evidence, for example by blaming and derogating innocent victims of misfortune (Lerner, 1980). Besides affecting intra- and inter-personal phenomena, the motivation to perceive the world as a just place also has more societal consequences. For instance, according to system justification theory, the BJW is a mechanism through which individuals actively (but not necessarily consciously or blatantly) justify social systems (Kay & Jost, 2003; see also Lerner, 1980). By preserving their unconscious “fundamental delusion” (Lerner, 1980) that individuals and groups get what they deserve, including their statuses, and by perceiving unfair social systems as fair, individuals make societal change psychologically unnecessary (Jost et al., 2010).

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Theory and research, however, also suggest that people are not only conditioned to privately entertain unconscious beliefs in justice, but also to outwardly affirm this view (Alves & Correia, 2008, 2010b). This “BJW as a socially motivated and valued discourse” perspective, as we call it, has always been informed importantly by system justification theory and does not refute that the BJW serves as an unconscious mechanism that supports the *status quo* (Alves & Correia, 2008). This line of research, however, focuses on the social value contained in the very expression of the idea that the world is just for the self (PBJW) or other people (general BJW, Dalbert, Montada, & Schmitt, 1987). As with the expression of internality (Dubois, 1994), the social value of (P)BJW expression is likely mainly transmitted in contexts where evaluation practices, which are not supposed to be questioned, play a central role in the functioning of those contexts (e.g., educational settings, companies). For instance, individuals learn that, regardless of what they actually believe, they are supposed to state their grades and/or performance appraisals reflect what they do (expression of internality) and that it is just (expression of PBJW) (Pansu, Bressoux, & Louche, 2003).

The research reported in this article focuses on the social value of PBJW expression. It focuses on *PBJW* because past research has shown that, in Western societies at least, it is a more central discourse than general BJW (Alves & Correia, 2008; Testé & Perrin, 2013). It focuses on the social value of its *expression*, not on the social value of actually believing in it. Our choice is justified by the fact that a series of unpublished studies that simultaneously manipulated what the targets said and what they actually thought about justice in their lives showed that what targets said exerted a stronger influence on how participants judged them (Sutton, Alves, Correia, Douglas, & McClellan, 2010).

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PBJW Expression and Social Value

The expression of high PBJW is more approved of than that of low PBJW (e.g., “I think I generally get what I deserve” versus “I think I rarely get what I deserve”, respectively). Indeed, Alves and Correia (2010b) found that individuals indicated higher levels of PBJW when they were asked to self-present positively (e.g., being perceived as competent or successful) rather than negatively (e.g., being perceived as pitiful; see also Alves & Correia, 2008). Furthermore, Alves and Correia (2008) found that targets expressing high versus low PBJW are judged more positively (see also, Alves & Correia, 2010a; Testé & Perrin, 2013). Testé et al. (2012) found that a candidate for immigration in France who expressed high versus low PBJW was judged as having a higher potential to integrate himself successfully in French society. Alves and Correia (2013) found that the expression of high versus low PBJW is more valued whether targets explicitly refer to their negative or positive outcomes.

These studies thus showed that individuals are granted more social credit, or value, if they say their life outcomes are just rather than unjust. Using the model of social value proposed by Beauvois (1995; see also Beauvois & Dépret, 2008), those studies also showed that individuals expressing high versus low PBJW are judged as having more affective value, or “social desirability” (e.g., being judged as pleasant versus unpleasant). Importantly, these individuals are especially judged as having more market value, or “social utility”, a quasi-economic dimension of social value (e.g., being judged as competent, persistent and entrepreneurial versus incompetent, quitter and passive). This indicates that individuals who express high versus low PBJW are judged as having more of what it takes to become personally successful and to contribute to the success of a system based on economic Liberalism (Beauvois, 1995; Cambon, 2006; Pansu et al., 2003).

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In Western societies at least, the social value of PBJW expression can be surprisingly strong. Indeed, recently Alves et al. (2015) showed that not only non-victims, but also non-innocent and innocent victims of enduring and acute suffering are judged more positively in both social utility and desirability if they express high versus low PBJW. This counterintuitive finding hints at two points. First, it indicates that even low-status groups and social categories can be expected to comply with this system-legitimizing discursive norm or, at least, not to run counter it by expressing low PBJW (for the social costs of complaining about discrimination by low-status groups, see Kaiser & Major, 2006). Second, that finding indicates that differing social value does *not* derive from high PBJW expression being a more objective or truer account of reality than low PBJW expression. This is consistent with Alves and Correia (2010a) who found that individuals approve more of the expression of high than low PBJW, but do not believe much in either. As Alves et al. (2015) commented, “[These results] show that the expression of PBJW is a socially demanded discursive performance even when it seems objectively unreasonable to make such demands” (p. 79).

High versus low PBJW expression is thus more valued and judged as more appropriate (or injunctively normative; e.g., Cialdini & Trost, 1998) inasmuch as it reflects the prescriptive expectations of those who teach and require their display (e.g., teachers and managers). In sum, the expression of PBJW is a “judgment norm” (Dubois, 2003). This is consistent with the notion of “shared reality” through which communication becomes possible, and (smooth) relationships can be not only established, but also maintained and regulated (Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008; see also Garfinkel, 1967). In this view, the expression of high PBJW is a discursive mechanism that, contrary to the expression of low PBJW, serves to align individuals with relevant others in desired relationships, namely professional ones. Specifically, this social alignment or tuning contributes to justify and

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perpetuate a meritocratic-based system. As Jost et al. (2008, p. 174) stated “(. . .) social tuning is affected by the system-justifying tendency to maintain and bolster existing forms of social inequality.”

Limitations of Previous Research, Goals and Hypotheses

As indicated, research has found that individuals use higher degrees of PBJW to self-present as successful (Alves & Correia, 2010b). They also judge targets who express high versus low PBJW as having higher social utility (Alves & Correia, 2010a), that is, as having higher *potential* to be successful (Cambon, 2006). Nevertheless, research on PBJW as a valued discourse has several limitations which we aim to address here.

First, this line of research has not investigated yet whether those targets are also judged as more *deserving* of social success. This is a very relevant issue because at its core lies the concept of “deservingness”, which is central in just world theory (Lerner, 1977). Deservingness of success as a dependent measure will more clearly show than a social value measure that whether or not individuals display such discourse plays an important role in impactful decisions involving their lives. In other words, we expect deservingness judgments to reflect not only people’s target value, but to also affect decisions about the treatment they receive. Finding such evidence further strengthens the claim that the expression of PBJW is indeed a socially valued discourse, through which individuals validate the way social life is organized.

Second, until now individuals taking part in research on PBJW as a judgment norm only read what a target had said about their personal (in)justice. To overcome this limitation, in two studies we manipulated information on targets’ performance appraisal (PA). From a purely meritocratic logic, individuals are supposed to only take PA into account when deciding whether other people deserve being successful and promoted. By manipulating

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information on targets' PA, however, we could test whether these decisions are also influenced by the fact that the targets engage in a system-legitimizing discursive performance, such as expressing high (versus low) PBJW.

Third, the social value of expressing high versus low PBJW (and judgment norms in general) has been interpreted as being the result of perceptions that such discourse is more suitable to societal expectations at various levels (e.g., society at large, educational system actors, managers). This indicates that, although individuals are motivated to perceive the world as a just place (Lerner, 1980), there is also important social pressure to express this worldview. What is more, it also indicates that individuals are aware of such pressure, thus knowing (partly at least) how key systems work. Nevertheless, this central interpretation has not been tested yet. We thus tested for the first time that perceived suitability to socio-organizational expectations mediates between the expression of PBJW and success deservingness judgments. Importantly, we tested this mediation whilst statistically controlling for several socially valued characteristics attributed to the targets: their social desirability or likability, actual success (Study 1), rationality (Study 2), optimism (Study 3) and the extent to which they are perceived as victims (Study 4).

Controlling for these variables seemed relevant because targets who express high versus low PBJW are not only likely judged as more suited to socio-organizational expectations, but also as more socially desirable (as reviewed), successful, rational and optimistic. Indeed, since having more social utility equals to having more potential to succeed (Cambon, 2006), then targets who express high versus low PBJW are likely perceived as actually more successful. As regards target rationality, given that scores of PBJW correlate positively with several subjective wellbeing and mental health indices (Dalbert, 2001; for experimental evidence, see Correia, Batista, & Lima, 2009), and

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stereotypically at least, these involve the control of one's emotions, participants could infer that the targets who express high versus low PBJW are also more rational. Judgements on target rationality were important to control for because in Western societies and organizations at least, the expression of rationality, like that of PBJW, has social utility (Auzoult, 2004). As far as optimism is concerned, an adjusted "realistic optimism" can be instrumental for individuals to accomplish goals that require some kind of effort (for a discussion, see Schneider, 2001). Indeed, Le Barbenchon and Milhabet (2005; see also Milhabet, Le Barbenchon, Cambon, & Molina, 2015) found that the expression of optimism has social utility. Given that PBJW scores correlate positively with optimism, at least among non-victims (Cubela-Adoric & Kwartuc, 2007; see also Correia & Vala, 2004), and their expression has social utility, we reasoned that participants could infer that the targets who express high versus low PBJW are also more optimistic. Finally, it was important to control for perceptions of targets as nonvictims or victims, that is, as having either a taken for granted identity or a devalued identity lacking social utility and desirability, respectively (e.g., Alves et al. 2015; Brickman et al., 1982; Goffman, 1963; Weiner, 1995).

Hypotheses

In four experimental studies we tested the following. First, targets expressing high versus low PBJW will be judged as more deserving of success. Second, targets expressing high versus low PBJW will be judged as more suited to socio-organizational expectations. Third, target suitability to socio-organizational expectations will mediate between the expression of PBJW and deservingness of success. Fourth, targets expressing high versus low PBJW will be judged as more socially desirable, successful (Study 1), rational (Study 2), optimistic (Study 3) and less of a victim (Study 4). We explored whether the mediation of

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target suitability to socio-organizational expectations held after controlling for the effects of these judgments about the targets.

Study 1

In this study we tested that: a target expressing high versus low PBJW would be judged as more deserving of success, more suitable to societal expectations (society on the whole, the educational and organizational systems), more socially desirable and as having higher status (Hypothesis 1); judged suitability to societal expectations would mediate the relation between PBJW expressed and judgments of deservingness (Hypothesis 2). We also tested whether the mediation of target suitability to socio-organizational expectations held after controlling for the effects of attributed target social desirability and actual success.

Method

Participants

One hundred and one Portuguese university students (43 males, 58 females), aged between 18 and 58 ($M = 21.04$, $SD = 5.63$).

Experimental design and procedure

The study has a two groups design (PBJW expressed: high vs low). Participants were invited to take part in the study during class time in various faculties in Lisbon metropolitan area. Participation was voluntary, and this was stressed by both the class teachers and the experimenter. Participants were also informed that they could give up any time without having to justify their decision.

The manipulation of high and low PBJW used in this study (and in Studies 2 and 3) was the same as in Alves and Correia (2010a). Specifically, participants read one text which contained three excerpts from an approximately 60-minute bogus interview with a university student. The two bogus interviews manipulating the expression of high or low PBJW were

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randomly given among participants. The interview excerpts were actually the items of the PBJW scale (Dalbert, 1999) which were transformed in order to convey the idea of low or high PBJW. We added three time points (minutes 10, 26 and 43) before each excerpt so that participants would not perceive the targets as having said everything about their (in)justice in a row. We also included some expressions that emulate oral speech, in order to increase believability (“that’s it”; “for instance”; “it’s like I said before”). Specifically, in the high [low] PBJW condition, participants read:

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

Afterwards participants answered the dependent measures and provided some personal information (their sex and age). Finally, they were probed for suspicion, debriefed and thanked.

Measures¹

Target deservingness of success (five items; $\alpha = .91$). “This is someone who deserves to get far in life.”; “It’s someone who deserves to get a powerful position.”

Target suitability to socio-organizational expectations (eight items; $\alpha = .91$). “It is socially expected that people express these ideas.”; “Teachers approve of this kind of talk.”; “In organizations one has to talk like this in order to get ahead.”

Target social desirability (three items; $\alpha = .84$). “I like having people with this kind of discourse around me.”

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Target actual success (three items; $\alpha = .70$). “This person has an economically sound situation”.

Participants responded on seven-point Likert-type scales (1 = *I don't agree at all*; 7 = *I very much agree*). An exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation on all items extracted four interpretable factors with eigenvalues higher than 1 (64.19% of variance explained) reflecting, for which the constructs the items had been devised.

Results and Discussion

As reported in Table 1, our Hypothesis 1 received support. Indeed, the target expressing high versus low PBJW was judged as more deserving of success, more suited to societal expectations, more socially desirable, and more successful.

In order to test our Hypothesis 2 we entered suitability to expectations as the intervening variable between expressed PBJW (X) and deservingness of success (Y) into a bootstrapped mediation analysis (Process for SPSS Model 4 with 10,000 resamples; 95% bias-corrected Confidence Intervals (CIs) see Hayes, 2013). As seen in Table 2 this analysis revealed a significant indirect path from PBJW to deservingness of success through perceived suitability to societal expectations. This path remained significant even when targets' social desirability and actual success were entered as covariates.

This study thus provides first-hand evidence that a target who expresses high versus low PBJW is judged as more deserving of success and that higher perceived suitability to societal expectations predicts those judgments. Furthermore, a target who expresses high versus low PBJW is judged as more socially desirable and successful. Even when these judgments about the target are controlled for, suitability to socio-organizational expectations still mediates between the expression of PBJW and deservingness of success judgments. This study thus further documents the social value of PBJW expression and identifies meta-

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perceptions of socio-organizational expectations as a psychosocial mechanism explaining such valuation.

Although Study 1 showed that a target expressing high versus low PBJW is judged as more deserving of success through suitability to socio-organizational expectations, it shares a common limitation with previous research in that it only manipulated PBJW expression. A more stringent test of both the social value of PBJW expression and the identified psychosocial mechanism involved in such valuation would require providing participants with other relevant information about the targets and still observe these patterns. In the next two studies participants thus read not only what the targets said about personal justice but also information about their competence as assessed by a legitimate organizational representative.

Study 2

In this study participants were asked to imagine themselves as being responsible for the decision of a promotion process at an organization. They were asked to judge how deserving of a promotion and general success the targets were based on two pieces of information: what they read the targets had said during an interview (their PBJW expression) and a performance appraisal (PA) report. Besides having to judge the targets on their success deservingness, participants also judged the targets on suitability to organizational expectations and rationality.

By manipulating PA we get more ecological validity, because in modern organizations hierarchical superiors are supposed to take decisions regarding careers based on subordinates' PAs. These processes supposedly focus on the quality of the subordinates' professional performance which is operationalized in a series of items that are given a mark (e.g., autonomy, problem solving). Reflecting meritocratic ideology, PAs may thus be

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presented as objective processes used to dismiss or promote people, or to grant higher or lower bonuses, pay rises, and so on. Nevertheless, what people say during the process, not only their performance, has an important role in such decisions (Pansu et al., 2003).

Furthermore, these decisions are also influenced by how individuals are judged as having certain valued characteristics. Reflecting the “rational myth” (Putman & Mumby, 1993), in Western societies and organizations at least, one such valued characteristic is being rational versus emotional. Individuals judged as rational versus emotional are seen as people who tend to weigh up the pros and cons before taking decisions, are able to exert control over the display of their emotions as well as over their supposedly negative effects on “good” reasoning. Being associated with social utility (Auzoult, 2004), rationality thus has market value.

Hypotheses

Reflecting the expression of PBJW as a judgment norm, we expected the targets who express high versus low PBJW to be judged as more deserving of success, more suited to organizational expectations and rational (Hypothesis 1). Reflecting meritocratic ideology, we expected the targets who get an above-average PA to be judged as more deserving of success than the targets who get an average performance appraisal and the latter to be judged as more deserving than their below-average counter-parts (Hypothesis 2). Finally, we expected that suitability to organizational expectations would mediate the relation between PBJW expressed and success deservingness (Hypothesis 3). We explored whether the effect of expressing high PBJW differs across PA conditions and whether the mediation of suitability to organizational expectations still held after target rationality judgments were controlled for.

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Method

Participants

Three hundred fifty-nine Portuguese university students participated (179 males and 181 females - two unreported-, aged between 17 and 68 ($M = 21.61$, $SD = 6.58$).

Experimental design and procedure

This study had a 2 (degree of expressed PBJW: low /high) X 3 (performance appraisal: below-average/ average/ above-average) between-subjects design².

Participants were randomly given a stapled block of sheets of paper. The first page contextualized the study by stating that PAs are common practices in companies for the attribution of several benefits, such as bonuses or promotions. The participants then read they were expected to take the perspective of someone who would have to decide whether someone (person X) should be promoted for the position as head of a department. On the following page, participants read two pieces of information: the interview excerpts and the PA. They were told that different people conducted the interview and the appraisal performance, and that the interview had taken place before the interviewee knew about his/her PA. We used this strategy in order to avoid the perception that what person X said during the interview influenced the PA or that the PA influenced what person X said in the interview.

The interview excerpts manipulated the degree of PBJW (high and low) in the same way as in Study 1. In the PA part, participants were presented with a grid comprising six common activity dimensions in modern organizations (“initiative”; “involvement in tasks”; “problem solving”; “deadlines”; “autonomy”; “keeping up-to-date”). We manipulated PA by indicating the ratings the target had got on each dimension on a 6-point scale: below-average

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(points 1 and 2) average (points 3 and 4) and above-average (points 5 and 6). A brief comment followed which summarized the main idea of that PA.

Dependent measures

Target Success deservingness (eight items; $\alpha = .94$). “To what extent does X deserve to be promoted?”; “X doesn’t deserve the promotion” (reverse-coded).

Target suitability to organizational expectations (five items; $\alpha = .82$). “In organizations one has to talk like this in order to get ahead in one’s career”; “Those who speak in this way go against their superiors’ expectations.” (reverse coded).

Target rationality (three items; $\alpha = .74$). “X usually thinks before acting”.

Participants responded on seven-point Likert-type scales. Since items were either statements or questions, scale anchors varied (1 = I don’t agree at all/ Not at all; 7 = I very much agree/ Very much).

An exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation on all items extracted three interpretable factors with eigenvalues higher than 1 (66.54% of variance explained) which mostly reflected the constructs the items had been devised for. The exception was the item “Person X is a careful thinker” which had similar loadings on the rationality and success deservingness factors. We decided to keep it in the rationality factor for meaning reasons and because analyses including this item in either factor or simply deleting it showed there were no differences in the result patterns.

Results

We ran three 2 (expressed PBJW: high/low) X 3 (appraisal performance: below-average/average/above-average) ANOVAs (one for each judgment). As reported in Tables 1 and 3, these ANOVAs supported our Hypotheses 1 and 2, respectively.

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Indeed, the main effects of expressed PBJW indicated that participants judged the targets who expressed high versus low PBJW as more deserving of success, as more suited to social expectations and as more rational. The main effects of PA indicated that the targets who respectively had above-average versus average versus below-average PA were judged as more deserving of success (all Tukey post-hoc $ps < .001$). Furthermore they were also judged as more suited to organizational expectations ($ps \leq .001$) and rational ($ps < .05$). None of the three interactions was significant at the .05 level: $F(2, 350)_{\text{deserving}} = 1.11, p = .33, \eta_p^2 = .006$; $F(2, 353)_{\text{suitability}} = 2.52, p = .08, \eta_p^2 = .014$; $F(2, 353)_{\text{rationality}} = 1.02, p = .36, \eta_p^2 = .006$. In sum, PA did not moderate the effect of expressed PBJW on success deservingness judgments.

We then tested whether judgments of discourse suitability to organizational expectations mediated the relation between PBJW expressed (low or high) and judgments of success deservingness (Hypothesis 3). We thus entered perceived suitability as the mediating variable between expressed PBJW (X) and deservingness of success (Y) into a bootstrapped mediation analysis (Process for SPSS Model 4 with 10,000 resamples; 95% bias-corrected Cis, Hayes, 2013). As seen in Table 2, there was a significant indirect path from PBJW to deservingness of success through perceived suitability to organizational expectations. This path remained significant even when targets' rationality was entered as a covariate.

Discussion

With this study we intended to show that the expression of high PBJW has a positive impact on judgments of success deservingness in a more specific context – that of a promotion decision – and when individuals are presented with other relevant information about the target - their PA.

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Consistent with meritocratic ideology, we found that PA had the expected effect. Indeed, the higher the PA, the more targets were judged as deserving of success. Nevertheless, the expression of PBJW also had a positive effect on such judgments. Although the effect of PBJW expressed was much weaker than that of PA, it points to the fact that individuals do not only take into account meritocratic criteria in their deservingness judgments. Furthermore, its effect is independent of PA, which indicates that the positive effect of PBJW on deservingness judgments is equivalent across PA levels.

As in the previous study, the effect of PBJW expressed on success deservingness judgements was also indirect. Specifically, the targets who expressed high versus low PBJW were judged as more suited to organizational expectations. In turn, these judgments predicted higher success deservingness judgments. Furthermore, the target who expressed high versus low PBJW were judged as rational. Nevertheless, even when these judgments about the target were controlled for, suitability to socio-organizational expectations still mediated between the expression of PBJW and deservingness of success judgments.

Studies 1 and 2 thus document the impact of expressing PBJW on success deservingness judgments through suitability to socio-organizational expectations. Study 2 also shows this impact is present even when other information about the targets is present. Nevertheless, in none of these studies did the targets explicitly referred to what was (un)just in their lives.

Study 3

Based on Alves and Correia (2013) this study extends Study 2 by manipulating a third piece of information, specifically whether the targets refer to the (in)justice of positive or negative events in their lives. Our goals were to: 1) –test that the expression of PBJW also affects success deservingness judgments when targets specifically refer to events in their

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lives; 2) replicate that this relation is mediated by suitability to organizational expectations even when information on the targets' PA is present (as in Study 2); and 3) test whether this mediation holds after judged target optimism is controlled for.

In this study we measured target optimism to control for its effect in the mediation model. We reasoned this was an important decision because research has shown that optimism and PBJW, despite being conceptually distinct, correlate positively (Dalbert, 2001). It is thus possible that individuals infer that targets who express high versus low PBJW are more optimistic. Furthermore, as reviewed in the introduction, the expression of optimism, like that of PBJW, has social utility (e.g., Le Barbenchon & Milhabet, 2005).

Hypotheses

Reflecting the expression of PBJW as a judgment norm, we expected that targets who express high versus low PBJW would be judged as more deserving of success, more suited to organizational expectations and optimistic (Hypothesis 1). As in Study 2, we also expected that the targets who get an above-average versus average PA will be judged as more deserving of success (Hypothesis 2). We expected that perceived suitability to organizational expectations would mediate the relation between PBJW expressed and success deservingness (Hypothesis 3). We explored whether this mediation held after controlling for the effects of target optimism.

Method

Participants

Two hundred forty-five Portuguese university students participated (111 males and 134 females aged between 17 and 41, $M = 21.35$, $SD = 3.37$).

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Experimental design and procedure

This study has a 2 (degree of expressed PBJW: low /high) X 2 (PA: average/ above-average) X 2 (event valence: positive/ negative)³ between-subjects design.

The procedure was identical to that of Study 2. As in Alves and Correia (2013), however, participants also read whether the targets were referring to either positive or negative events. An example of high [low] PBJW for positive events was: “(Minute 10) “I think that I generally [rarely] deserve my successes: overall, my successes are [not] just...” An example of high [low] PBJW for negative events was: “(Minute 10) “I think that I generally [rarely] deserve my failures: overall, my successes are [not] just...”.

Furthermore, they also answered to a measure of judged target optimism. There are only two levels of PA to avoid an excessively complex experimental design and because in Study 2 expressed PBJW and PA did not interact.

Measures

Target success deservingness (eight items; $\alpha = .89$). “This is someone who deserves to get a powerful position”.

Target suitability to organizational expectations (five items; $\alpha = .85$). “X has a suited discourse to the workplace.”

Target optimism (three items; $\alpha = .85$). “X is an optimistic person.”

Participants responded on seven-point Likert-type scales (1 = I don’t agree at all/ Not at all; 7 = I very much agree/ Very much).

An exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation on all items extracted three interpretable factors with eigenvalues higher than 1 (64.63% of variance explained), which mostly reflected the constructs the items had been devised for. The exception was “How suitable do you think person X is for the position as head of the department” which had similar

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loadings in two factors (“target success deservingness” and “target optimism”). Since preliminary analyses indicated that the results did not change when that item was included or excluded, we decided to keep it in the former factor.

Results

We ran four 2 (expressed PBJW: high/low) X 2 (appraisal performance: average/above-average) X 2 (event valence: positive/negative) ANOVAs, one for each judgment. Means, standard deviations and statistics for expressed PBJW main effects can be consulted in Table 1. Means, standard deviations and statistics for PA and event valence main effects can be consulted in Table 3.

Success deservingness

The main effects of expressed PBJW, PA and event valence indicated that participants judged the targets as more deserving of the promotion and success when they expressed high versus low PBJW, had above-average vs. average PA, and referred to positive vs. negative events. The two-way and the three-way interactions were nonsignificant, $F_s \leq 3.16$, $p_s \geq .08$, $\eta_p^2_s \leq .013$.

Target suitability to organizational expectations

The main effects of expressed PBJW, PA and event valence indicated that participants judged the targets as more suited to societal expectations when they expressed high versus low PBJW, had above-average vs. average PA, and referred to positive vs. negative events. The two-way and the three-way interactions were nonsignificant, $F_s \leq 1.90$, $p_s \geq .17$, $\eta_p^2_s \leq .008$.

Target optimism

The main effects of expressed PBJW and event valence indicated that participants judged the targets as more optimistic when they expressed high versus low PBJW, and when they

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referred to positive vs. negative events. There was also a two-way interaction between PBJW expressed and event valence, $F(1, 235) = 23.52, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09$. This interaction, however, stemmed from a strong PBJW expression main effect, which makes the interaction uninterpretable (see Garcia-Marques, Garcia-Marques, & Brauer, 2014). The main effect of PA and the remaining interactions were nonsignificant, $F_s \leq 1.25, p_s \geq .27, \eta_p^2_s \leq .005$.

Mediation analyses

As in the previous studies, we entered the intervening variables between expressed PBJW (X) and deservingness of success (Y) into a bootstrapped mediation analysis (Process for SPSS Model 4 with 10,000 resamples; 95% bias-corrected CIs; Hayes, 2013). As can be seen in Table 2, there were significant indirect paths from PBJW to deservingness of success through both perceived suitability to organizational expectations and target optimism. This path remained significant even when targets' optimism was entered as a covariate.

Discussion

The targets who expressed high versus low PBJW, those who referred to positive versus negative events, and those who had above-average versus average PA were judged as more deserving of success and more suited to organizational expectations. The targets who expressed high versus low PBJW and those who referred to positive versus negative events were also judged as more optimistic. As expected, suitability to organizational expectations mediated between the expression of PBJW and success deservingness judgments even when targets' optimism was controlled for. This study thus both replicates and extends Study 2.

Despite convergent evidence of higher social value of high versus low PBJW expression, the previous studies do not allow us to affirm whether this difference results from high PBJW expression leading to higher deservingness judgments or/and low PBJW

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expression leading to lower deservingness judgments. In the next study we set out to test this.

Study 4

With this study we aimed to replicate the finding that targets expressing high versus low PBJW are judged as more deserving of success, and that target suitability to socio-organizational expectations mediates this relation whilst using a different operationalization of PBJW expression.

This study extends previous research by including a control condition, in which the target does not express PBJW. It also controls the extent to which the targets were judged as “victims” or “regular people”. Taking into account that in the previous studies the targets who expressed low versus high PBJW were less liked and judged as having valued characteristics to a lesser extent (status, rationality and optimism), we expected that the target who expressed low PBJW would be perceived as more of a victim, that is, as having a devalued identity in comparison to the other targets (see Alves et al., 2015).

This being the first time that a control condition of PBJW expression is used in this research line, we were unable to make one single hypothesis. As such, we tested whether, in comparison to the control condition:

- 1) the expression of high PBJW increases deservingness judgments, whilst the expression of low PBJW does not decrease them. On the one hand, this pattern would indicate that individuals take the expression of high PBJW as a “criterion of excellence” (Pansu et al. 2003). In other words, the expression of high PBJW should be taken as a demonstration that targets know how to excel in professional contexts where that performance is required. On the other hand, the expression of low PBJW could be interpreted as the default talk of the “regular person”;

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2) the expression of low PBJW decreases deservingness judgments, whilst the expression of high PBJW does not increase them. This pattern would indicate that the expression of high PBJW is valued, in the sense that it is perceived as the talk by default of the “regular person” – but without reaching the “criterion of excellence” status. This pattern would also show that the expression of low PBJW is devalued;

3) the expression of high PBJW increases deservingness judgments, whilst the expression of low PBJW decreases them. This pattern would indicate that the expression of high PBJW is a criterion of excellence and that of low PBJW is devalued.

Method

Participants

One hundred forty-six Portuguese students took part in this study (41 males, 104 females, one unreported). Their ages varied between 17 and 61 ($M = 22.43$, $SD = 5.53$).

Design and procedure

This is a between-participants experimental study with three levels of PBJW expression: high, low, no expression (control condition).

This study was fully conducted online. Around one third of the sample took part in the study by clicking on a link on the first author’s Facebook page inviting university students to take part in the study (only one participant was not a university student). These participants were asked to only take part in the study if they could do it in a quiet environment. The remaining sample took part at LAPSO, the psychology lab at ISCTE-IUL. These participants were given course credit.

Participants first read a shortened version of a text used as a control condition (nonvictim) in Alves et al. (2015). Participants read about the daily routine of a (fictitious) university student (named as X) who had allegedly participated on a previous study by our

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research team, and had agreed to have their report used in other research, provided their anonymity was ensured. The text, which Alves et al. (2015) had pre-tested as neutral in terms of (in)justice, portrayed the target as a “regular person”, by describing their daily routine (e.g., means of transports used from home to university, meals, classes, hobbies). An English translation of the full text can be consulted online.

Participants in the experimental conditions then read the bogus university student answers to the Personal BJW scale (Dalbert, 1999). This scale comprises seven items (e.g., “I believe that most of the things that happen in my life are fair”) that can be responded to on 6-point Likert-type scales (1 = completely agree; 6 = completely disagree). Participants were informed that the “student” had answered to other scales, but to avoid fatigue they would only read the answers on this one (allegedly randomly chosen by the system). The bogus answers of the university student operationalized the expression of low and high PBJW as in Alves and Correia (2008, Study 2). Specifically, we operationalized the expression of high PBJW by marking four items as “completely agree” and three items as “agree” (points 1 and 2, respectively); we operationalized the expression of low PBJW by marking four items as “disagree” and three as “completely disagree” (points 5 and 6, respectively). Participants in the control condition did not read any bogus responses to the PBJW scale.

Afterwards, participants responded to the PBJW manipulation check and to our measures. Participants in the experimental conditions responded to items gauging perceived suitability to socio-organizational expectations, deservingness of success and targets as victims. Participants in the control condition did not respond to items gauging suitability to socio-organizational expectations, because they were not applicable to that target. We also included a total of nine filler items (four within the suitability to social-organizational expectations items, and five within the deservingness of success items). The filler items

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asked about targets' fashion tastes and hobbies (e.g., "X doesn't give much thought about what to wear."; "S/he prefers theatre to cinema").

In the end participants read a text debriefing them about the study and were invited to email the first author if they had any questions about it.

Measures

Manipulation check.

PBJW expressed (two items; $r = .90$). "X said s/he: rarely deserves what happens to him/her – generally deserves what happens to him/her"; "X said his/her life is: rarely just - generally just").

We included these items, taken from Alves et al. (2015), because this expression of PBJW operationalization had been used only once (Alves & Correia, 2008, Study 2).

Target deservingness of success (seven items, $\alpha = .79$). "S/he is a person who will deserve to be promoted to high positions at work."

Target suitability to socio-organizational expectations (11 items, $\alpha = .93$). "In organizations one has to respond more or less in this way in order to progress in one's career."

Targets as victims (four items, $\alpha = .84$). "X is: not a victim at all; very much a victim."

Participants responded to all items in 7-point Likert type scales. The anchors for all items, except those of "targets as victims were: 1 = I don't agree at all; 7 = I very much agree. An exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation on all items extracted three interpretable factors with eigenvalues higher than 1 explaining 66.13% of variance (pairwise deletion used because participants in the control condition did not answer suitability to expectations items). The first factor ($\lambda = 6.02$; 33.45%) comprised the 11 items of target

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suitability to socio-organizational expectations. The second factor ($\lambda = 3.66$; 20.36%) included the positive items of target deservingness of success. The third factor ($\lambda = 2.22$; 12.32%) comprised the two negative deservingness items and the item “Society devalues those who respond in this way to this scale.” The latter had similar loadings in Factors 1 and 3, but preliminary analyses with and without this item yielded the same results. We also decided to join the other two items of Factor 3 with those of Factor 2 into a single measure, because they indicate “deservingness”.

Results

Manipulation check

A t-test for independent indicated that the target who expressed high PBJW was judged as having said his/her life was more just ($M = 6.17$, $SD = 0.78$) than the target who expressed low PBJW ($M = 1.52$, $SD = 0.95$), $t(92) = 25.80$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.77$.

Main Analyses

As reported in Table 1, the target expressing high versus low PBJW was judged as more suited to societal expectations and as more deserving of success (Tukey $p < .001$). The target who did not refer to justice (control condition) was also judged as more deserving of success than the target expressing low PBJW ($p < .001$). The difference with the target expressing high PBJW, however, was nonsignificant ($p = .58$). As regards perceptions of the targets as victims, the target who expressed low PBJW was perceived as more of a victim than both the target who expressed high PBJW and the control target (both Tukey $ps < .001$).

Next we entered suitability to expectations as the intervening variable between expressed PBJW (X) and deservingness of success (Y) into a bootstrapped mediation analysis (Process for SPSS Model 4 with 10,000 resamples, 95% bias-corrected CIs; Hayes, 2013). Only the participants in the low and high PBJW expression conditions were included

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($n = 94$). As seen in Table 2, and replicating the previous studies, this analysis revealed a significant indirect path from PBJW to deservingness of success through perceived suitability to societal expectations. This path remained significant even when judgments of targets as victims were entered as a covariate.

Discussion

Using a different operationalization of PBJW expression, this study replicates the results of Studies 1-3. This study is also important because it tested for the first time the social value of PBJW expression against a control condition in which the target does not express either degree of PBJW.

The results are consistent with pattern 2 presented in the introduction to this study. Specifically, in comparison to the control condition target, the one who expressed low PBJW was judged as less deserving of success, whilst the target who expressed high PBJW was judged as deserving. Despite giving further evidence that the expression of high PBJW has higher social value than low PBJW, this study does not indicate that it is judged as a “criterion of excellence” (Pansu et al., 2003) but rather the expected normal talk of everyday life by individuals who fit in society. Consistent with this idea, the target who expresses low PBJW is seen as more of a victim than the other two targets. We will return to this issue in the general discussion.

General Discussion

Drawing on research showing that the expression of PBJW is socially valued (Alves and Correia, 2008, 2010a,b; Testé & Perrin, 2013, Testé et al., 2012), namely that targets who express high versus low PBJW are judged as having a higher potential to be successful (or having higher social utility; Beauvois, 1995; Cambon, 2006), the research reported here

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advances our knowledge on the social value of PBJW expression in important ways. This research has both theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical implications

We ascertained across four experimental studies that targets who say that their lives are just are judged as more deserving of success than targets who say that their lives are not just. This pattern holds even when participants read information about the targets' PA (Studies 2 and 3) and what the targets refer to when speaking about personal (in)justice (Study 3). We also showed in the four studies that perceived suitability to socio-organizational expectations mediates the relation between expressed PBJW and success deservingness judgments. This was a crucial, but as of yet untested, assumption in the definition of a judgment norm (Alves & Correia, 2010a). The expected mediation received support in all four studies. Finally, we showed that our mediation model held even when we statistically controlled for participants' judgments on several characteristics of the targets: social desirability, actual success, rationality, optimism and victim status. This research is thus an important contribution to the literature because it shows the influence of the expression of PBJW on decision-making, and highlights the crucial role of meta-knowledge about discursive demands as a socio-psychological mechanism explaining that process.

Up to this point in our discussion, we have adopted the view that expressing high PBJW can be positively impactful in decision making processes. In this view, displaying that discourse acts as a cue to someone's positive social value, thus making the difference between a more or less favourable decision. The results of Study 4, however, raises the possibility that that difference does not derive from the expression of high PBJW having a positive impact on those decisions. Those results indicate instead that the expression of low PBJW has a negative impact. This study thus suggests that avoiding the expression of low

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PBJW is more crucial than resorting to the expression of high PBJW. This is consistent with the “negativity bias”, according to which negative information has a stronger impact than positive information in numerous domains, such as impression formation (for reviews, see Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Our Study 4 suggests that this positive-negative asymmetry (e.g., Peeters & Czapinski, 1990) also plays an important role when individuals are deciding whether someone deserves success. It thus seems more important to identify individuals who display what the system judges as a negative discourse (low PBJW) than a positive one (high PBJW).

Indeed, Webster (1964, as cited by Baumeister et al., 2001) found that, in job interviews, negative information is more used to reject candidates than positive information is used to hire them. This is consistent with the idea that negative information carries an element of (metaphoric) contamination (Rozin & Royzman, 2001), and those individuals may be metaphorically perceived as agents against the purity of the system’s norms. By identifying those individuals, the system may exclude them, thus preserving its integrity and continuity. Consistent with this reading, our results indicate that someone who expresses low PBJW is perceived more of a victim than both the target who expresses high PBJW and the control target. Individuals thus associate the expression of low PBJW to having a devalued, even stigmatized or spoiled identity (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Goffman, 1963; Neuberg, Smith, & Asher, 2003). On the contrary, positive information is taken for granted, being perceived as the natural state of affairs (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Consistent with this, the nonsignificant difference between the control and the high PBJW conditions in Study 4 indicates that the expression of high PBJW is seen, not as a “criterion of excellence”, but as the normal talk of “regular” people who are adapted to societal rules and

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life. In other words, individuals seem to assume high PBJW by default and associate low PBJW with individuals with a stigmatized, thus metaphorically contaminated, identity.

Practical Implications

Whether or not the expression of high PBJW is a criterion of excellence the fact remains that it is more valued than the expression of low PBJW. These studies show that the relevance of the social value of PBJW is not simply theoretical. It has important consequences in people's lives. Indeed, if social actors express statements that the *status quo* values – for they legitimize it - it rewards them with the possibility of succeeding. These studies also show that individuals also seem to willingly participate in this kind of arrangement. Indeed, drawing on Weiner's (1995) metaphor of social life as a court, participants played the role of "judges" (see also Gilibert & Cambon, 2003) and decided that targets who express high versus low PBJW are more deserving of success. These decisions reflect judgments, according to which those targets are more suited to occupy higher ranks in the system. Contradicting these expectations, whether as a conscious option or simply because individuals lack normative knowledge (or "normative clearheadedness", Somat & Vazel, 1999), may thus be a barrier for individual social upward mobility. This can be especially perverse for members of low-status groups or social categories.

Indeed, members of low-status groups who are not aware of the social value of PBJW statements may think that expressing low PBJW is the "right" thing to do because it is a more realistic account of their lives. As our results show, however, expressing low PBJW has detrimental effects on the way they are judged, thus lowering their already minute chances of social mobility. Training these people on normative clearheadedness by focusing on the social value of PBJW, whilst stressing that it is not anchored on "truth", may lead these individuals to align their talk with expectations at school and later at work settings. In

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turn, this will likely enhance their chances of social mobility (for the positive effects of training long-term unemployed individuals in normative clearheadedness, see Beauvois & Dubois, 2001; Férec, Pansu, Py, & Somat, 2011). This, of course, raises ethical questions.

Indeed, such training will likely promote a conformist discourse among trainees, one which teaches individuals to engage in a performance that suits socio-organizational expectations and legitimizes the “meritocratic myth” (Ellemers & Barreto, 2009; see also Mijs, 2016). To this objection we counter-argue that with such training, individuals lacking normative clearheadedness may, in this respect at least, compete at the same level as their counterparts who somehow got that knowledge and who may not be necessarily as competent as them. It goes without saying that trainees should also be made aware of the interpersonal and societal pitfalls if individuals do not counteract socio-organizational expectations (e.g., being perceived as “slimy”, Vonk, 1999; groupthink, Janis, 1982). Such training should thus address these issues, and let individuals choose their course of action. Without such knowledge – that represents empowerment - individuals cannot be said to really choose. Importantly, teachers and employers should also be made aware that their appraisals may be unwittingly biased by what their students/workers say, such that they may favour those who express high versus low PBJW. They should also be made aware that this can be especially deleterious for disadvantaged individuals. We believe that such training will be an important contribution towards a shared reality (Jost et al., 2008) that takes into account the needs of all social actors involved.

Limitations and Further Directions

Although the studies presented here are innovative and contribute to the development of the recent “the expression of PBJW as a judgment norm” approach (e.g., Alves & Correia,

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2008, 2013; Testé & Perrin, 2012), we would like to point out some limitations and to indicate new ideas for future research.

The first limitation regards sampling. Our participants were university students and the great majority of them were young. They thus had presumably little or no professional experience. As such, it is very unlikely that most of our participants have ever decided on someone's promotion or are fully aware of the actual norms in such settings. According to the size effects in Studies 2 and 3, the influence of PBJW expressed is small in comparison to that of PA. Nevertheless, it is possible that people who actually make such decisions prefer promoting individuals who "scratch the system's back" to a larger extent than our results allow us to conclude. This would imply that in actual professional settings the expression of high PBJW is a criterion of excellence, and that our results are conservative in this regard. Research could thus benefit from being conducted among individuals who take actual decisions about other people's careers in organizations. This would complement research showing that individuals who are more versus less motivated to behave according to social norms advance faster in their careers even though they are not necessarily more competent technically (e.g., Kilduff & Day, 1994).

Second, as one anonymous reviewer pointed out, our measures of suitability to socio-organizational expectations only include items that refer to the suitability of what targets say, not to what they believe. Future studies should address this limitation. We would expect that if "*belief* suitability to socio-organizational expectations" mediates the relation between PBJW expressed and success deservingness judgments, its size will be smaller than "*discursive* suitability". This hypothesis derives from the fact that what people say is more important than what they believe in social value judgments (Sutton et al., 2010), and that

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judgment norms are approved of regardless of whether they are perceived as true statements (Alves & Correia, 2010a; Dubois, 2003).

Third, as indicated in the introduction, we chose to focus on the expression of PBJW because it carries higher social value than general BJW (GBJW; Alves & Correia, 2008; Testé & Perrin, 2013). However, it would be relevant to test whether individuals judge targets who express high versus low GBJW as more deserving of success and whether perceived suitability to socio-organizational expectations also mediates this relation. Given that some research indicates that the expression of GBJW also has social value (Alves & Correia, 2008, 2010a, 2013; Gangloff & Duchon, 2010; but see Testé & Perrin, 2013), we would expect that pattern of results to occur. Given that the social value of GBJW versus PBJW expression is less strong (Alves & Correia, 2008, 2010a), we would also expect the effect sizes to be smaller. This hypothesis, however, is based on research conducted in Western countries. Possibly in cultural contexts where individuals tend to have higher scores on GBJW than PBJW (Wu et al., 2013) we should expect the reverse pattern, that is, the effects of GBJW versus PBJW expression should be larger.

Conclusion

In four studies we gave further evidence that the expression of high versus low PBJW has more social value: those individuals are judged as more deserving of success. This can be explained by the fact that the expression of such discourse is judged as more suited to prescriptive socio-organizational expectations. Whether or not the expression of high PBJW expression can be a criterion of excellence in specific contexts is still an open question. Our research, however, allows us to state that it is judged as the normal talk of the “regular citizen”.

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Footnotes

¹ For space reasons, we only provide some examples of items used in the four studies. All items can be accessed online.

² We conducted a pilot study with a 3 (degree of PBJW expressed: high/ moderate/ low) X 2 (PA: average/ above-average) (N = 87). This was intended to check whether the expression of moderate PBJW is as socially valued as that of high PBJW (Alves & Correia, 2010a), when other information about the targets is provided. Since deservingness judgments did not differ between high and moderate PBJW, we decided to drop the latter in Study 3 and to add low PA for exploratory purposes. For more details on this pilot study, please refer to the online file.

³ About two thirds of the participants read the targets were referring to their success or failures (n = 162), as in Alves and Correia (2013). The remaining third (n = 83) read that the targets referred to either “good” or “bad” things, which is closer to the classic formulation of BJW (Lerner, 1980). Up to a point in our data collection these four valence of events conditions were collected together randomly. Since analyses showed no differences between the “bad things” and “failures” and between the “good things” and “successes” conditions, we decided to focus on collecting data with only the “successes” and “failures” conditions to make a narrower connection with Alves and Correia (2013) and because it seemed a more “natural” reference in an organizational context. Exploratory analyses with the whole sample again indicated no differences between the “bad things” and “failures” and between the “good things” and “successes” conditions on the three measures.

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Table 1.

Means (and standard deviations) of the various measures by Belief in a Personal Just World expressed (Studies 1 - 4)

	Low PBJW	High PBJW	No PBJW expressed (control condition)	Inferential Statistics
Study 1				
Success deservingness	2.47 (1.13)	3.32 (1.11)	-	$t(99) = 3.79, p < .001, d = 0.76$
Suitability to socio-organizational expectations	2.09 (0.78)	3.90 (1.10)	-	$t(99) = 9.53, p < .001, d = 1.90$
Target actual success	2.77 (0.99)	3.57 (1.17)	-	$t(99) = 3.69, p < .001, d = 0.74$
Target social desirability	2.94 (1.31)	3.96 (1.80)	-	$t(99) = 3.96, p < .001, d = 0.65$
Study 2				
Success deservingness	3.13 (1.24)	3.47 (1.27)	-	$F(1, 350) = 5.72, p = .017, \eta_p^2 = .016$
Suitability to organizational expectations	2.45 (1.01)	3.68 (1.24)	-	$F(1, 353) = 109.74, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .24$
Target rationality	3.63 (1.24)	4.16 (1.31)	-	$F(1, 353) = 14.19, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$
Study 3				
Success deservingness	3.47 (1.05)	3.92 (1.03)	-	$F(1, 232) = 10.63, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$
Suitability to organizational expectations	2.24 (0.86)	3.57 (1.15)	-	$F(1, 235) = 106.46, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .31$
Target optimism	2.40 (1.12)	4.13 (1.43)	-	$F(1, 235) = 143.82, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .38$
Study 4				
Success deservingness	4.10 (0.84)	4.91 (0.84)	4.75 (0.74)	$F(2, 142) = 13.63, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .16$
Suitability to socio-organizational expectations	2.69 (1.03)	4.85 (0.84)	-	$F(1, 92) = 121.50, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .57$
Targets as victims	4.59 (1.18)	2.05 (0.68)	2.01 (0.68)	$F(2, 143) = 102.25, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .59$

Note: Degrees of freedom vary due to missing answers

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Table 2.
Coefficients of Mediation Models Between Expressed Personal Belief in a Just World and Success Deservingness

Mediation of suitability to expectations	a path	b path	ab path
Study 1			
without controlling for target social desirability and actual success	1.82 (1.43, 2.20)	0.52 (0.29, 0.75)	0.95 (0.53, 1.38)
controlling for target social desirability and actual success	1.40 (0.93, 1.87)	0.36 (0.08, 0.64)	0.50 (0.18, 0.92)
Study 2			
without controlling for target rationality	1.23 (0.99, 1.46)	0.61 (0.51, 0.71)	0.75 (0.59, 0.94)
controlling for target rationality	1.04 (0.81, 1.28)	0.40 (0.29, 0.51)	0.45 (0.32, 0.61)
Study 3			
without controlling for target optimism	1.34 (1.08, 1.60)	0.40 (0.27, 0.53)	0.54 (0.33, 0.77)
controlling for target optimism	0.71 (0.42, 1.00)	0.33 (0.18, 0.49)	0.24 (0.11, 0.42)
Study 4			
without controlling for targets as victims	1.07 (0.87, 1.27)	0.19 (0.01, 0.37)	0.21 (0.01, 0.42)
controlling for targets as victims	0.73 (0.36, 1.11)	0.22 (0.03, 0.42)	0.16 (0.03, 0.38)

Note. Path a: regression coefficient from the independent variable to the mediator; Path b: regression coefficient from the mediator to the dependent variable. The indirect effect estimate is calculated by multiplying paths a and b. Values in brackets represent lower and upper limits of 95% Confidence Intervals of estimations. Covariates control for their effects on the mediator and the DV.

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Table 3.

Means (and standard deviations) of the various measures by performance appraisal (Studies 2 and 3) and by event valence (Study 3)

	Performance Appraisal			Inferential Statistics
	Below-average	Average	Above-average	
Study 2				
Success deservingness	2.52 (0.99) _a	3.12 (0.89) _b	4.20 (1.26) _c	$F(2, 350) = 75.29, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .30$
Suitability to organizational expectations	2.56 (0.97) _a	3.06 (1.24) _b	3.55 (1.40) _c	$F(2, 353) = 20.85, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .11$
Target rationality	3.36 (1.11) _a	3.75 (1.18) _b	4.54 (1.32) _c	$F(2, 353) = 29.27, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .14$
Study 3				
Success deservingness	-	3.27 (0.84)	4.09 (1.10)	$F(1, 232) = 41.36, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .15$
Suitability to organizational expectations	-	2.72 (1.08)	3.09 (1.31)	$F(1, 235) = 5.57, p = .019, \eta_p^2 = .02$
Target optimism	-	2.76 (1.89)	3.06 (1.86)	$F(1, 235) = 0.96, p = .33, \eta_p^2 = .004$
Study 3				
		Event valence		
		Negative/Failures	Positive/Successes	
Success deservingness		3.49 (1.04)	3.91 (1.04)	$F(1, 232) = 10.49, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$
Suitability to organizational expectations		2.70 (1.15)	3.13 (1.26)	$F(1, 235) = 10.57, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$
Target optimism		2.73 (1.25)	3.82 (1.63)	$F(1, 235) = 56.91, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .20$

Note. Values with different subscripts differ at $p < .05$ (Tukey post-hoc tests)

Degrees of freedom vary due to missing answer

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