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The buffering–boosting hypothesis of the expression of general and personal belief in a  
just world for successes and failures

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### Abstract

Although past research on the expression of belief in a just world (BJW) identified such statements as judgment norms, it has not ascertained whether their social value holds when individuals refer to good and bad outcomes.. We aimed at investigating whether such is the case, which constitutes a more stringent test of the “BJW as judgment norms” view. Participants judged the targets on two dimensions of social value: social desirability and social utility. We hypothesized and found that high versus low BJW buffered the negativity of the associated negative dimension(s) of discourses and boosted the positivity of the associated positive dimension(s) of discourses. This buffering–boosting pattern is discussed as revealing the system justification functions of the expression of BJW.

*Keywords:* belief in a just world, buffering–boosting hypothesis, social desirability, social utility, judgment norms

### **The Buffering–boosting Hypothesis of the Expression of General and Personal Belief in a Just World for Successes and Failures**

According to Lerner (1980), individuals are motivated to perceive the world as a place where people get what they deserve and deserve what they get, that is to believe in a just world (BJW). Alves and Correia (2008, 2010a) found that stating that people get what they deserve (general BJW; Dalbert, Montada, & Schmitt, 1987) or that one gets what one deserves (personal BJW; Dalbert, 1999) is met with social approval whereas stating the opposite is not. Furthermore, Alves and Correia (2010a) found that the social value of general (GBJW) and personal BJW (PBJW) is independent of judgments of truth. Drawing on the sociocognitive notion of “judgment norms” (Dubois & Beauvois, 2005, 2008), Alves and Correia (2008, 2010a) put forward that the expression of high BJW is socially valued not because it reflects reality but because it legitimizes current affairs.

For statements to be considered judgment norms they should be socially valued irrespective of the valence of their object (Dubois, 1994). Nevertheless, past research on the expression of the BJW has not ascertained this matter yet. In this paper we aim to address this theoretically relevant issue which has the very notion of BJW as a judgment norm at its core. We test whether targets expressing high (general or personal) BJW for successes and failures will be more socially valued than targets expressing low (general or personal) BJW for the same outcomes. More specifically, we test whether the negative value associated with a specific discourse will be buffered if it is conveyed through high rather than through low BJW. Likewise, we test whether the positive value associated with a specific discourse will be boosted if it is conveyed through high rather

than through low BJW. This is our buffering-boosting hypothesis of the expression of the BJW.

### **From the BJW as a Motivation to the Expression of the BJW as a Judgment norm**

Lerner (1980) proposed that individuals are motivated from an early age to perceive a “fundamental delusion” that they and others get what they deserve and deserve what they get. In fact, the phrase “BJW” was originally meant to be a metaphor for a motivation within individuals to perceive justice in the world (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). This motivated reasoning has positive consequences for individuals’ psychological well-being (e.g., Dalbert, 2001). Nevertheless, the effects of (general) BJW can be negative, specifically for innocent victims, who are threatening entities to individuals’ BJW. As has been amply shown, individuals often derogate or/and blame them for their plight as an unconscious strategy to protect their BJW against evidence that the world is not just (for reviews, see Darley, 2002; Hafer & Bègue, 2005).

Recent research has begun to focus on the very expression of the idea the BJW metaphor conveys (Alves & Correia, 2008, 2010a,b; see also Testé & Perrin, in press). This research is based on the sociocognitive approach which has centered on the experimental study of the social value of several discourses (e.g., internality, self-sufficiency) and their role in Western societies (e.g., Dubois & Beauvois, 2005; Gilibert & Cambon, 2003). Alves and Correia have focused on the social value of discourses conveying the idea that the world is just and their role in the justification and legitimization of the status quo. This research is thus situated at the ideological level of analysis (Doise, 1986; for a review on ideological correlates and the BJW, see Furnham & Procter, 1989).

This perspective does not refute the system justification theory view (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2010) that individuals, even low-status ones, are motivated to perceive the systems they belong to as just, specifically when individuals cannot escape them (Kay et al., 2009) and their outcomes are dependent on the system (Van der Toorn, Tyler, & Jost, 2011). However, we stress that individuals, specifically high-status ones, are not only motivated to perceive justice in the system; they are also motivated, for self-interest reasons, to perpetuate a system of privileges (which can be rationalized as just, Jost & Banaji, 1994). One strategy to fulfill that goal is to demand that individuals discursively uphold the systems they belong to, thus legitimizing the domination relationships (Sanders & Mahalingam, 2012). As guardians of the system, high-status individuals have the power to impose self-serving discourses on other individuals through various more or less subtle means, for instance educational or working settings (in the case of internality, see Dubois, 2003; Pansu, Bressoux & Louche, 2003). These discourses may not objectively reflect reality and individuals do not necessarily believe them— they are thus “judgment norms” (Dubois, 2003). Nevertheless, individuals are aware that these discourses please those people who formally evaluate others, such as teachers or managers.

One such discourse is that we live in a generally just world/system where people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Alves & Correia, 2008). In fact, whereas affirming justice for the self and people in general has social value, denying it has not, irrespective of their being perceived as true or false statements (Alves & Correia, 2010a, Study 2).

### **Social Utility and Social Desirability: Two Dimensions of Social Value**

According to the model used in the sociocognitive approach, which is the most commonly used and validated one regarding societal norms (Dubois, 2003), there are two dimensions of social value (Beauvois, 1995): social utility and social desirability. Social utility refers to the person's market value (i.e., his/her adequacy to economic settings, for instance economically liberal ones). The notion of social utility comprises the characteristics leading to material and social success (e.g., confident, competitive; Cambon, 2006). Social desirability refers to the person's affective value and comprises the characteristics that make one be socially liked and approached (e.g., good-natured, polite; Cambon, 2006). Unlike other dichotomic models (see Cambon, 2006), this model explicitly views social actors as entities immersed in social structures, not as asocial individuals. Second, it stresses the evaluative function (or their social value) of these seemingly only descriptive dimensions. According to this model, traits not only describe people, as is commonly assumed; they also (or maybe mainly) evaluate individuals and position them in the social structure (hence the expression "social value") – they indicate what people "are worth" and not so much what they "are like" (Beauvois & Dépret, 2008; Beauvois & Dubois, 2009).

By applying this model to the expression of BJW, Alves and Correia (2010a, Study 1) found that a target who expresses high BJW (GBJW) is more positively judged on social utility than a target who expresses low GBJW (i.e., he/she has "market value"). A target who expresses high personal BJW (PBJW) is more positively judged not only on social utility but also on social desirability than a target who expresses low PBJW (i.e., he/she has both market and affective value, respectively; see also Testé & Perrin, in press). Nevertheless, research on the expression of BJW as judgment norms

has had a major limitation. In fact, the discourses on justice that participants read and judged were generic statements on (in)justice for either the self (e.g., “I think that I rarely/generally deserve what happens to me”) or other people (e.g., “I think that people rarely/generally deserve what happens to them”). Nevertheless, central in the definition of judgment norms is that these statements are socially valued when they refer to positive and negative outcomes (Dubois, 2003). Yet, this important premise in the definition of a judgment norm has not yet been tested regarding the expression of BJW.

Our goal is to ascertain whether the expression of high general and personal BJW is socially valued when individuals explicitly refer to positive and negative outcomes. For that purpose we have extended Alves and Correia (2010a, Study 1) in which participants read bogus interviews with an anonymous university student who expressed low or high GBJW or PBJW. In the current studies, the “interviewee” explicitly refers to successes or failures, and participants judged the targets on social utility and social desirability.

When we experimentally cross GBJW or PBJW with the kind of outcome we obtain several types of discourses: other-derogation/other-enhancement (when the target uses GBJW) and self-derogation/self-enhancement (when the target uses personal PBJW). These discourses also have associated social value, which we will develop in the introduction to each study. In this paper we propose that the negative or positive social value of these derogation-enhancement discourses can be respectively buffered or boosted by the social value associated with the BJW. In other words, the same discourse may have a not so low social value (buffer) or an even higher social value (boost) if it is conveyed through high rather than through low BJW.



As aforementioned, targets who express high GBJW are judged as relatively high on social utility and those who express high PBJW are judged as relatively high on both social utility and social desirability (Alves & Correia, 2010a). Thus, we expect that in the case of other-derogation/other-enhancement (Study 1), which are conveyed through (high or low) GBJW, the buffering-boosting process will have a more likely/stronger effect on social utility than on social desirability. Regarding self-derogation/self-enhancement (Study 2), which are conveyed through (high or low) PBJW, we expect that the buffering-boosting process will be felt on both social utility and social desirability.

### **Study 1**

In Study 1 we examined the social value of expressing GBJW for successes and failures. As stated above, when we experimentally cross the expression of GBJW with the kind of outcome we get two kinds of discourses – other-derogation and other-enhancement. The targets expressing high GBJW for failures (e.g., “I think that people generally deserve their failures”) or low GBJW for successes (e.g., “I think that people rarely deserve their successes”) engage in other-derogation or, at least, in other-effacing, namely denying others their competence. On the contrary, targets expressing high GBJW for successes (e.g., “I think that people generally deserve their successes”) or low GBJW for failures (e.g., “I think that people rarely deserve their failures”) engage in other-enhancement.

Other-derogation is met with very low perceptions of social desirability, and it is typical of individuals who “lick upward but kick downward” (Vonk, 1998). It also is a strategy to gain power over others and individuals who engage in it are likely seen as being high in social utility, for instance as competitive (Horowitz et al., 1991). On the

contrary, individuals who enhance a third-party are judged as socially desirable (e.g., good-natured). In fact, sometimes individuals self-promote by having someone else doing it on their behalf (Jones, 1990). It is unlikely that individuals would engage in this mediating role if it gave them an undesired identity. As far as we were able to find, the literature does not refer to the perceived social utility of those who engage in other-enhancement.

We argue that the way these discourses are conveyed – that is, either through high or low GBJW - do make a difference in the ratings of social utility at least. Thus, reflecting the social value associated with high GBJW, and consistent with our boosting-buffering hypothesis, we expect the degree of expressed GBJW to moderate the positivity and/or the negativity associated with a given discourse (i.e., other-derogation/other-enhancement).

Reflecting previous research, we expected a 1) main effect of the degree of expressed GBJW, such that targets who express high versus low GBJW will be judged higher on social utility. Furthermore, we also expected that 2) the target who conveys other-derogation through high GBJW for failures will be judged higher on social utility than the target who conveys other-derogation through low GBJW for successes.

We explored whether the target who expresses other-enhancement through high GBJW for successes will be judged higher on social utility than the target who expresses other-enhancement through low GBJW for failures. As reviewed, other-enhancement is clearly socially desirable. Although this does not exclude the possibility that it may also be socially useful, as previously noted, we did not find literature explicitly stating the social utility of other-enhancement. We also explored the patterns

of social desirability, that is, the dimension of social value for which past research has not found significant effects (but see Testé & Perrin, in press).

### **Participants**

The participants were 60 university students (21 males and 39 females) aged between 17 and 42 ( $M = 21.74$ ,  $SD = 4.14$ ).

### **Experimental Design**

This study has a 2 (degree of expressed GBJW: low/high) X 2 (outcomes: successes/failures) between-subjects design.

### **Dependent Measures and Procedure**

The participants answered, on 7-point Likert-type scales (1= nothing at all; 7 = very much so), questions regarding the extent to which they thought each of the same 15 adjectives used by Alves and Correia (2010a, Study 1) characterized the target. These adjectives concerned two dimensions of social value: social utility (competent, confident, competitive, independent, hard-working, intelligent, determined, responsible;  $\alpha = .88$ ) and social desirability (e.g., likable, helpful, sincere, warm, polite, good-natured, tolerant;  $\alpha = .78$ ).

The participants were randomly given a stapled block which contained the manipulations and the dependent measures. On the front page they read that the “excerpts of the interview” they were about to read had been taken from an approximately 50-minute interview with a university student as a part of previous research by our team. These “excerpts” included the same manipulations presented in Alves and Correia (2010a) to which we added the outcomes referred to (i.e., successes or failures). Each “excerpt” was preceded by three time references (minutes 10, 26 and 43) in order to give the idea that the sentences had not been said in a row. We also

added a few expressions that tried to emulate oral speech (“that’s it”; “for instance”; “it’s like I said before”) in order to increase believability. For instance, in the high [low] GBJW for successes [failures] conditions, participants read “(Minute 10) I believe that people [don’t] deserve their successes [failures]: generally successes [failures] in people’s lives are [aren’t] just... That’s it, I think that most of the things that happen to people in this domain are [aren’t] just”. Afterwards, participants answered the dependent measures and provided some personal information (their sex and age). Finally, they were probed for suspicion, debriefed and thanked.

### **Results and Discussion**

We conducted two 2 (degree of expressed GBJW: low/ high) X 2 (outcome referred to: successes/failures) ANOVAs, one for social utility and the other for social desirability. We conducted contrasts to test predicted results and used Tukey post-hocs to explore unpredicted results. We will first address social utility and then social desirability.

Consistent with previous research (Alves & Correia, 2008, 2010a) and our hypothesis 1, participants judged the targets who expressed high GBJW as more socially useful,  $M = 4.83$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ , than targets who expressed low GBJW,  $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ,  $F(1, 56) = 26.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .36$ . Planned contrasts also supported our hypothesis 2 that the target expressing other-derogation through high GBJW for failures would be judged as more socially useful than the target expressing other-derogation through low GBJW for successes,  $F(1, 56) = 10.52$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $\eta^2 = .12$  (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). In fact, that was the target who received the highest mean ratings in social utility. We explored whether or not the target who other-enhanced through high GBJW for successes was also judged as higher in social utility

than the target who other-enhanced through low GBJW for failures. A Tukey post-hoc test ( $p < .001$ ) indicated that such was the case.

As far as social desirability is concerned no main effects were significant, both  $F$ s  $< 1.20$ , both  $p$ s  $> .20$ . Only the interaction on this dimension of social value was,  $F(1, 56) = 9.93$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\eta^2 = .16$ . As can be seen in Table 1, Tukey post-hoc tests indicated that the target who other-enhanced through high GBJW for successes was judged as more socially desirable than the target who expressed high GBJW for failures ( $p = .02$ ), or low GBJW for successes ( $p = .04$ ).

This study thus supports the social value attached to the expression of high GBJW and extends it to successes and failures. Following previous research (Alves & Correia, 2010a) the effect of GBJW is more strongly felt on social utility than social desirability, which indicates that targets expressing high GBJW are perceived as “having what it takes to succeed” (Cambon, 2006). In fact, between two targets conveying the same discourse (other-enhancement or other-derogation) the one who expressed it through high GBJW was more positively judged on social utility than the one who expressed it through low GBJW. Nevertheless, there was also an effect on social desirability which basically differentiates other-enhancement from other-derogation discourses.

## Study 2

In Study 2 we examined the social value of expressing PBJW for successes and failures. As stated above, when we experimentally cross the expression of PBJW with the kind of outcome we get two types of discourses – self-derogation and self-enhancement. The targets who self-derogate are those expressing low PBJW for successes (e.g., “I think that I rarely deserve my successes”) or high PBJW for failures

(e.g., “I generally deserve my failures”). The targets who self-enhance are those expressing high PBJW for successes (e.g., “I think that I generally deserve my successes”) and low PBJW for failures (e.g., “I think that I rarely deserve my failures”).

Individuals do not enjoy being close to people who self-derogate (see Leary, 1995) and they judge them as relatively submissive and passive (Horowitz et al., 1991). Thus, these targets are perceived as low in both social utility and social desirability. Overt self-enhancement is both common (e.g., the better-than-average phenomena - Hornsey & Jetten, 2004) and approved of in specific domains, such as job interviews (e.g., Stevens & Kristof, 1995). Inappropriate self-enhancement, however, usually lowers individuals’ social desirability (e.g., a bragger; but see Holtgraves & Dulin, 1994) but not social utility (but see Schlenker, Pontari, & Christopher, 2001).

As was the case with Study 1, we argue that the way these discourses are conveyed make a difference in these ratings. Reflecting the social value associated with high PBJW, and consistent with our buffering-boosting hypothesis, we expected the degree of expressed personal B JW to moderate the positivity and/or the negativity associated with a given discourse (i.e., self-derogation/self-enhancement).

Reflecting previous research we expected: 1) a main effect of the degree of expressed PBJW, such that targets who express high versus low PBJW will be judged higher on social utility and social desirability. Furthermore, we also expected that the target who conveys 2.1) self-derogation through high PBJW for failures would be judged higher on social utility and social desirability than the target who conveys self-derogation through low PBJW for successes (buffering of relatively low social utility and desirability); 2.2) self-enhancement through high PBJW for successes would be judged higher on social utility and social desirability than the target who conveys self-

enhancement through low PBJW for failures (boosting of relatively high social utility and desirability).

### **Participants**

The participants were 57 university students (17 males and 40 females) aged between 17 and 48 ( $M = 21.91$ ,  $SD = 4.90$ ).

### **Experimental Design**

The study has a 2 (degree of expressed PBJW: low/high) X 2 (outcome: successes/failures) between-subjects design.

### **Dependent Measures and Procedure**

The participants answered questions regarding the same 15 adjectives used in Study 1 (social utility:  $\alpha = .87$ ; social desirability:  $\alpha = .84$ ). The only difference between the two studies consisted in the fact that the target referred to his/her own outcomes through low or high PBJW. For instance, in the high [low] personal B JW for successes [failures] conditions, participants read “(Minute 10) I believe that I [don’t] deserve my successes [failures]: generally successes [failures] in my life are [aren’t] just...That’s it, I think that most of the things that happen to me in this domain are [aren’t] just”.

### **Results and Discussion**

We conducted two 2 (degree of expressed PBJW: low/high) X 2 (outcome: successes/failures) ANOVAs, one for social utility and the other for social desirability.. We will first address social utility and then social desirability.

Consistent with previous research (Alves & Correia, 2008, 2010a) and our hypothesis 1, participants judged the targets who expressed high PBJW as more useful,  $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ , than the targets who expressed low PBJW,  $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ,  $F(1, 53) = 18.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .36$ .

As can be seen in Table 2, and in line with our hypothesis 2.1, the target who self-derogated through high PBJW for failures was judged as more socially useful than the target who self-derogated through low PBJW for successes,  $F(1, 53) = 5.68, p = .02, \eta^2 = .07$ . In fact, the latter target was judged as the least socially useful. Also as predicted (hypothesis 2.2), the target who self-enhanced by expressing high PBJW for successes was judged as more socially useful compared to the target who self-enhanced through low PBJW for failures,  $F(1, 53) = 14.52, p < .001, \eta^2 = .18$ . In fact, that target was judged as the most socially useful.

Also consistent with previous research and our hypothesis 1, the degree of PBJW main effect on social desirability indicated that the targets who expressed high PBJW,  $M = 4.14, SD = 0.73$ , were judged as more socially desirable than the targets who expressed low PBJW,  $M = 3.21, SD = 0.64, F(1, 53) = 30.52, p < .001, \eta^2 = .58$ .

As can be seen in Table 2, and in line with our hypothesis 2.1, the target who self-derogated through high PBJW for failures was judged as more socially desirable than the target who self-derogated through low PBJW for successes,  $F(1, 53) = 28.54, p < .001, \eta^2 = .29$ . In fact, the former target was judged as the most socially desirable. Also as predicted (hypothesis 2.2), the target who self-enhanced through high PBJW for successes was judged as more socially desirable than the target who self-enhanced through low PBJW for failures,  $F(1, 53) = 5.59, p = .02, \eta^2 = .06$ . Interestingly, the target who self-enhanced through low PBJW for failures was judged as low in social desirability as the target who self-derogated through low PBJW for successes (the two least socially desirable targets).

This study gives further support to the social value attached to the expression of PBJW and extends it to successes and failures. As expected, judgments of targets who



expressed high PBJW were more positive than judgments of targets expressing low PBJW. Furthermore, the effect of PBJW is felt on both social utility and social desirability. This pattern indicates that targets expressing high PBJW for successes and failures are perceived as having both “what it takes to succeed” and “what it takes to be liked” (Cambon, 2006). In fact, between two targets conveying the same discourse (self-enhancement or self-derogation) the one expressing it through high PBJW is more positively judged on social utility and social desirability than the one expressing it through low PBJW. Consistent with the idea that self-enhancement is a discourse high in social utility, but not necessarily in social desirability, the target who self-enhances through high PBJW for successes was judged as the most useful but only the second most desirable. The target who self-enhanced through low PBJW for failures was judged as low in desirability as the target who self-derogated through low PBJW for successes. This indicates that engaging in self-enhancement through low PBJW is judged as an inappropriate strategy.

Finally, as expected, the target who self-derogated through low PBJW for successes was judged as the least socially desirable. Nevertheless, given the low desirability of self-derogation, it is surprising that the target who self-derogated through high PBJW for failures was judged as the most desirable. In the general discussion we will offer some explanations for this extremely interesting result.

### **General Discussion**

Research on general and personal BJW as judgment norms (Alves & Correia, 2008, 2010a) has rested on the implicit assumption that the social value of expressing high BJW applies when individuals refer to positive and negative outcomes. The current

studies have tested for the first time this central feature in the definition of a judgment norm regarding the expression of BJW.

Consistent with previous research, we expected and found that targets who express high BJW are judged higher in social utility and/or social desirability than targets who express low BJW. Furthermore, consistent with our buffering-boosting hypothesis, we found that the use of high BJW to convey derogatory and enhancing discourses buffers their associated negative dimension(s) of social value and boosts their associated positive dimension(s).

In Study 1 the target who engaged in other-derogation through high GBJW for failures was perceived as more socially useful (in fact, the most socially useful) than the target who other-derogated through low GBJW for successes. In the same study, the target who engages in other-enhancement through high GBJW for successes was judged as higher in social utility than the target who engaged in other- enhancement through low GBJW for failures. In fact, the latter target was judged the lowest in social utility. The target who other-enhances through high GBJW for successes was positively judged on both dimensions of social value, being the most desirable target. Although individuals high in social utility may be targets of envy, thus being perceived as low in social desirability (Fiske et al., 2002), in this specific case his/her social utility is obtained through a double normativity: expressing a desirable discourse (enhancement of a third party) through a highly regarded way (high BJW).

Results in Study 2 are also consistent with the buffering-boosting reasoning. In fact, the target who self-enhanced through high PBJW was judged as more socially useful (in fact, the most socially useful) than the target who self-enhanced through low PBJW for failures. The same pattern was observed for self-derogation – the target who

self-derogated through high PBJW for failures was judged more socially useful than the target who self-derogated through low PBJW for successes. In fact, the latter target was judged as the least socially useful. Thus, the low social utility associated with self-derogation can be compensated, to a certain degree at least, if it is expressed through high PBJW. The target who self-derogates through low PBJW for successes was judged especially harshly, because he/she received the lowest ratings on social utility and social desirability. In other words, this target was judged to have little of what it takes to succeed and to be liked, which points to the fact that expressing low PBJW is an especially aversive strategy (Alves & Correia, 2010a). Thus, failing to self-promote is perceived as a more serious social “defect” than engaging in other-derogation (the expression of high GBJW for failures was the most socially useful). This may be cynically perceived as a “natural” part of the competitive social game.

There was a result pointing to an even stronger than expected social value of PBJW. Specifically, participants attributed the highest judgments of social desirability to the target who conveyed self-derogation through high PBJW for failures and not to the target who self-enhanced through high PBJW for successes. Although we assumed this target would be mainly perceived as engaging in self-derogation, this result is also consonant with the idea that he/she is perceived as assuming his/her responsibilities. If that is the case, there is some similarity with the norm of internality (Dubois, 1994; Dubois & Beauvois, 2008). Nevertheless, targets high in internality are generally judged as socially useful, not desirable (e.g., Dubois & Beauvois, 2005). How can we account for this pattern?

One reason may be the kind of manipulation we used. Although the target said nothing about the justice of his/her successes, it is possible that by focusing on failures

participants assumed that the target would think the opposite about successes.

Participants may have thought that the target was the kind of person who assumes his/her responsibilities for failures, but when it comes to successes, he/she may be too modest to accept them. On the one hand, modesty is desirable (Sedikides, Gregg, & Hart, 2007), and when it is balanced it does not lower perceptions of competence (i.e., utility) (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). Nevertheless, a too modest individual tends to be judged as relatively incompetent (Leary, 1995), which may have been the case of this target; hence, relatively low social utility.

As recently shown, individuals associate the expression of high personal and general BJW with individualistic values (Testé & Perrin, in press). The abovementioned pattern may derive from the fact that the target who expresses low personal BJW for successes does not conform to individualistic ideals in which achievements and self-promotion are highly regarded (see Hornsey & Jetten, 2004; Leary, 1995). Thus, self-derogation when expressed through low BJW represents a double counter-normativity. On the contrary, other-derogation seems to be perceived as part of the game. To a certain extent, it seems to parallel the expression of “individualism in a narrow sense” (i.e., giving priority to one’s goals) (Dubois & Beauvois, 2005, Study 4): higher association with (positive) social utility than with (positive) social desirability.

As indicated in the introduction, research on the expression of the BJW does not preclude that individuals are motivated to see justice in the systems. Nevertheless, it has focused on the social value and the explicit strategic use of such statements (Alves & Correia, 2010b). In the future, research should investigate the motivational aspect contained in the expression of BJW. For instance, given that system threat elicits defensive behaviours and cognitions on behalf of the system (Jost et al., 2010; Kay et

al., 2009), the expression of high BJW is possibly even more valued when such a threat is present rather than absent.

To sum up, these studies give further evidence that, at least when targets are uncategorized, the expression of high BJW has social value but that of low BJW does not. The expression of high BJW buffers the negativity of the associated negative social value of a discourse and boosts the positivity of its associated positive social, which supports the “BJW as judgment norms” notion.

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**Footnote**

<sup>1</sup> The main effect of valence was also significant,  $F(1, 53) = 5.27, p = .03, \eta^2 = .11$ , indicating that targets who referred to failures were judged as more socially desirable than targets who referred to successes,  $M_s = 3.87 SD = 0.64$  vs.  $M_s = 3.48 SD = 0.73$

Table 1

*Means (and standard deviations) of social utility and social desirability, according to the degree of expressed general BJW and referred to outcome*

	Low general BJW		High general BJW	
	Successes	Failures	Successes	Failures
	(I)	(II)	(II)	(I)
Social utility	4.05a,b (0.92)	3.54b (0.86)	4.68a,c (0.92)	5.03c (0.52)
Social desirability	3.60a (0.77)	4.05a,b (0.81)	4.50b (1.07)	3.53ab (0.70)

*Note.* Mean values in line not sharing the same letter differ at  $p < .05$ , or better.

(I) = other-derogation; (II) = other-enhancement

Table 2

*Means (and standard deviations) of social utility and social desirability, according to the degree of expressed personal BJW and referred to outcome*

	Low personal BJW		High personal BJW	
	Successes (I)	Failures (II)	Successes (II)	Failures (I)
Social utility	2.87a (0.91)	3.57b (1.12)	4.96c (0.62)	3.81b (1.27)
Social desirability	3.23a (0.54)	3.19a (0.74)	3.73b (0.61)	4.54c (0.61)

*Note.* Mean values in line not sharing the same letter differ at  $p < .05$ , or better.

(I) = self-derogation; (II) = self-enhancement