

## Just World, Trust in Institutions and Socioeconomic and Political Moderations

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**ABSTRACT** – This study investigates the system justifying role through belief in a just world (BJW), testing whether institutional trust is related to this belief and whether this relationship depends on specific socioeconomic and political factors. A research with 381 university students, aged 18 to 64 years ( $M = 22.4$ ,  $SD = 6.25$ ), explored their BJW and their degree of institutional trust. Regression and moderation analyses revealed that BJW relates to institutional trust only in left-wing and with lower income participants. We believe this occurs because they need more an ideology that justifies the system to trust the institutions. This phenomenon can prevent these people from pursuing structural social changes since the system is now seen as fair.

**KEYWORDS:** belief in a just world, institutional trust, political orientation, socioeconomic status.

## Mundo Justo, Confiança nas Instituições e Moderações Socioeconômicas e Políticas

**RESUMO** – Este estudo investiga o papel justificador do sistema através da crença no mundo justo (CMJ), testando se a confiança institucional está relacionada com essa crença e se esta relação depende de fatores socioeconômicos e políticos específicos. Uma pesquisa com 381 universitários, com idades de 18 a 64 anos ( $M = 22,4$ ;  $DP = 6,25$ ), explorou seus graus de CMJ e confiança institucional. Análises de regressão e moderação revelaram que a CMJ se relaciona com a confiança institucional apenas naqueles de esquerda e menores rendimentos. Acreditamos que isso ocorra porque estas pessoas precisam mais de uma ideologia justificadora do sistema para poder confiar nas instituições. Este fenômeno pode lhes indispor a buscar mudanças sociais estruturais, já que o sistema passa a ser visto como justo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** crença no mundo justo, confiança institucional, orientação política, status socioeconômico.

Brazilian political and social institutions are the subject of widespread and persistent distrust among citizens, although certain institutions are trusted more than others (Russo, 2016). The Latinobarómetro (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2018), for example, pointed out these differences despite the generally low levels of trust: while 73% of the population in Brazil trust the Church a lot or moderately, 58% trust the armed forces and 33% trust the police, only 7% trust the government and 6% trust political parties. It was also found that 33% of the

population trusted the judiciary, and only 12% trusted the National Congress. In turn, the Datafolha Institute (2019) found that 22% of respondents have great trust in large national companies and 21% in the press. In Lima et al. (2018) study, the family was the institution most trusted, with a score above the middle of the scale used. The results thus show a tendency to distrust the institutions that legitimize a democratic regime, and persistent distrust in institutions can be a problem for the stability of modern democracy.

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Democratic governments cannot resort to coercion to the same extent as other regimes and, therefore, they need society's trust to be legitimate. People do not have confidence in the political system if it cannot increase or maintain social welfare and provide a perceived good quality of governance (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006). Thus, when the institutions of this system become inefficient in the face of social demands, engage in corruption or disregard rights, they generate distrust and discredit (Dalton, 1999; Miller & Listhaug, 1999; Tyler, 1998). Moreover, in a context of significant social inequality, such as in Latin American countries, the perception that political and economic systems benefit people differently can lead disadvantaged people not to trust them (Colen, 2010). As a result, institutions lose their legitimacy. Once delegitimized, they may later be perceived as dispensable or even harmful to society, opening the way for anti-democratic and authoritarian alternatives to solve social problems.

Although structural variables, such as the quality of governance, are fundamental to understanding support for a system's institutions, individual-level variables also explain them, mainly because they are related to structural variables in one way or another. Trust in political and social institutions varies according to people's political, economic and social differences, including schooling indicators, religious beliefs, political positioning and income. Thus, some people trust institutions more than others. In the Latin American context, for example, Ribeiro (2011) found that the ideological self-positioning of Argentines and Peruvians was related to political trust. The further to the right of the political

left-right spectrum and the higher the income, the more people trusted democratic political institutions (parliament, political parties, the judiciary, public services and trade unions). Ramos et al. (2016) came to the same conclusion for Europeans. Therefore, in this study, we expect higher income and political positioning on the right to be related to trust in institutions.

Wealthier people may trust institutions even more if they live in a society with more significant income differences among individuals (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006). People with more socio-economic privilege are less likely to risk trusting institutions (Ramos et al., 2016) because these people are generally treated with dignity and favored by institutions. On the other hand, people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are generally not rewarded for trusting them. When social inequality is greater in a society, people from the highest strata are more likely to rely on the political establishment, such as it is and which has favored them to maintain the *status quo* and keep their position in the social hierarchy intact.

Right-wing and higher-income people are those who generally trust institutions the most to maintain the status quo (Lima et al., 2018; Ramos et al., 2016; Ribeiro, 2011). Suppose institutions must gain legitimacy across the board, not just those in the highest social strata. In that case, we wonder what can make lower-income people and leftists trust the institutions of a system that perpetuates social inequality as great as the Brazilian one. We ask this question in the context of the Belief in a Just World theory.

## BELIEF IN A JUST WORLD AND TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS

Some studies indicate a positive relationship between trust and social beliefs, such as the belief in a just world (Otto et al., 2009; Zuckerman & Gerbasi, 1977). Belief in a Just World (BJW), according to the theory developed by Melvin Lerner (1980), is the motivation for people to act, to a greater or lesser extent, as if they believed the world is a just place to live. Therefore, they believe that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). BJW has important adaptive purposes that lead people to defend it in the face of threats and injustice (Dalbert, 2001). According to Otto et al. (2009), confronting an injustice either one experienced or observed happening to another person threatens one's belief that justice prevails in the world – the basis of BJW. Thus, when people with high levels of BJW experience injustices that cannot be resolved, they seek to restore justice – literally or figuratively. According to Dalbert (1999), this can be done by, among other things, playing down the offender's actions, perceiving them as unintentional, or downplaying the injustice itself. Thus, they reinterpret the situation as fair, acceptable or correct.

Therefore, BJW has at least three adaptive functions: the function of giving individuals confidence, the function of processing injustice, and the function of protecting mental health (Dalbert, 2001; Otto et al., 2009). In this perspective, trust can be an expression of BJW. People with higher BJW tend to trust more because they are confident that others will act reasonably and that they will be treated reasonably by others (Hafer & Sutton, 2016). This relationship is not limited to the interpersonal level but extends to the societal level.

In this sense, in addition to the correlation between BJW and general interpersonal trust, Correia and Vala (2004) and Zhang and Zhang (2015) also found that BJW correlates positively with trust in institutions. Thus, the more one endorses the belief that the world is a just place, the more one trusts social institutions. We believe that BJW is the predictor of trust in institutions in this relationship. However, BJW may not be related to institutional trust in all people because it has many individual determinants that seem to have a clear common goal.

In general, people with a high BJW are more religious, authoritarian and more focused on a belief in internal control than people with a low BJW (for a review, see Dalbert & Donat, 2015). More conservative political attitudes and right-wing ideologies are also associated with a higher BJW, as people who think this way tend to venerate high-status people and disparage low-status people, focus on order and control, and support the *status quo* (Hafer & Sutton, 2016). Therefore, dominant ideologies and positions are often associated with high BJW. However, the belief in a just world is not always so evident. For example, people from higher socioeconomic classes do not always have significantly higher BJW levels than people from lower classes.

The relationship between BJW and social and economic status is interesting. Some research in the United States has shown that African Americans, and other participants with low socioeconomic status, endorsed BJW more than White and wealthier participants (Hunt, 2000; Umberson, 1993). Similarly, in a survey of Brazilian students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, Thomas (2018) found that participants from disadvantaged groups perceived the world to be fair to a greater extent than the more privileged. People in vulnerable social contexts may see the system as less escapable. Consequently, they would be more likely to have a higher BJW to adapt and restore justice in a situation perceived as intractable or difficult to overcome.

System justification theorists already suggest that in certain circumstances, the people who suffer the most from a given situation are paradoxically the least likely to question, challenge, reject or change it (e.g., Jost et al., 2003). Henry and Saul (2006), therefore, tested whether even people in one of the poorest countries in the world, Bolivia, would support beliefs that justify the *status quo*. They found that low-status youth believed more than high-status youth in the effectiveness of government in responding to the needs of the people. These findings support theories that emphasize the maintenance of social stratification. One of the explanations is the reduction of cognitive dissonance (Jost et al., 2003) so that members of low-status groups can use cognitive strategies to deal with the dissonance created by the tension of contributing to the stability of a system that harms them.

Although BJW theory was initially developed to explain how people respond to situations of interpersonal injustice, there is empirical evidence from this perspective that it is related to the perceived legitimacy of social systems in certain situations (Martin & Cohn, 2004; Ng & Allen, 2005; Rubin & Peplau, 1975). BJW would be linked to system legitimacy because it would facilitate justice perceptions, even in systems that work against people's interests (Hafer & Sutton, 2016). Along these lines, another research (e.g. Silva et al., 2018) has found that adherence to BJW is related to legitimizing differences in socio-economic status between groups, which encourages the expression of discriminatory behaviors towards the most disadvantaged. Furnham (1991)

even showed that economic and social inequalities are seen as just in an unequal society where most people believe that the world is a just place to live. In this situation, people would believe that the poor have fewer resources because they earn less.

In this sense, inequality is also legitimized to some extent by the BJW. In other words, the BJW is also a means of legitimizing the social system. For some lower-class people, it would make them justify and consequently accept and conform to the way things are. In order to put it in the words of Lerner (1980), it is a fundamental delusion. In this study, based on the correlates of institutional trust found in the literature (for a review, see Ramos et al., 2016; Ribeiro, 2011), we assume that having higher income and being right wing are positively associated with trust in institutions. So how do people with lower incomes and left-wing affiliations trust institutions? We suggest that they do if they have a higher BJW. In other words, without the BJW, many of these people might not trust institutions because of the circumstances and structural conditions in which they live, such as the perception of the inability of the capitalist system to promote social well-being. However, if they promote beliefs that justify social systems leading to the notion that lack of well-being is due to individual responsibility, such as the BJW, they might trust institutions. This would be another way of showing that the BJW plays a role in justifying the system for low-income people.

The problem with trusting institutions even when they act against their interests, as Cichočka et al. (2018) note, is that too much institutional trust is associated with low political engagement because it can lead to a failure to perceive the need for social change. This can have significant concrete social consequences in societies like Brazil, where the welfare state is weak and ineffective in addressing social inequalities. So, if, on the one hand, trust in democratic political institutions is essential for the stability of the democratic regime, on the other hand, if the institutions are not effective, it can be detrimental to the search for social change as it legitimizes them. This is particularly worrying when it occurs among people who need structural social change and who should seek it most, such as low-income people.

With this in mind, we wonder how institutions can gain people's trust, for whom institutions often do little to meet their needs. We ask whether BJW is associated with institutional trust and for which people this is the case. Understanding the role of individual differences in BJW and its relationship to trust in institutions is essential. It is crucial to know whether, as we suspect, specific individuals need this belief to trust institutions, which leads us to think about why they do. Suppose that only people in the poorest strata need a high BJW to trust institutions to a greater extent, especially government and public institutions. In this case, this could be an indication of the existence of a system-building role in this belief.

This question has not yet been adequately answered in the literature of the area. For this reason, the present study aims to analyze the relationship between BJW and trust, specifically institutional trust, which is crucial for the system's legitimacy. We hypothesized that: (1) BJW, right-wing political orientation and higher family income

correlate positively with trust in institutions, as these are variables that have been correlated with trust in the literature (Ramos et al., 2016; Ribeiro, 2011); and (2) left-wing political positioning and low family income moderate the relationship between BJW and trust in institutions, the core hypothesis of this study.

## METHOD

### Participants

The study participants were university students from a public university in the state of Paraíba, Brazil. The sample included 381 participants aged between 18 and 64 years ( $M = 22.4$ ,  $SD = 6.25$ ). We performed a power analysis on

WebPower (Zhang & Yuan, 2018), considering the study design, and test power of .80 with  $p < .05$ , which indicated that this sample is large enough to detect an effect size equal to or greater than  $f = .15$  in a regression analysis with interaction terms. Table 1 contains the socio-demographic profile of the participants.

Table 1  
*Participants' sociodemographic profile.*

Variable	N	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	223	59
Male	155	41
<b>Political orientation</b>		
Left	196	52.4
Center	134	35.8
Right	44	11.8
<b>Household income</b>		
Less than 1 minimum wage	12	3.2
1 minimum wage	27	7.1
1-3 minimum wages	97	25.6
3-5 minimum wages	91	24
5-10 minimum wages	87	23
10-15 minimum wages	39	10.3
More than 15 minimum wages	26	6.9
<b>Religion</b>		
Catholic	125	33
Evangelical	57	15
Spiritist	24	6.3
Afro-Brazilian	19	5
Other	21	5.5
No religion	133	35.1

## Instruments

We presented participants with a list of 17 Brazilian institutions of interest to the study: Executive, Legislative, Judicial, Political Parties, Federal Police, Military Police, Armed Forces, Businesses, Television and Radio, Newspapers and Magazines, Digital Media, Human Rights Organizations, Trade Unions, Student Associations and Movements, Popular Movements, Residents' Associations and Churches. The participant's task was to indicate their level of trust (none, low, medium and high) in each of these institutions.

We used a five-item scale developed and validated by Linhares et al. (2022) to measure belief in a just world. The scale assesses the construct using popular sayings that reflect core BJW principles (e.g., "You reap what you sow"). Participants' responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). We chose this scale because it measures BJW indirectly and has high internal consistency. In the present study, the internal consistency of the scale was high as it had an alpha of .81. We also included a socio-demographic questionnaire with questions on age, gender, major, religion, political-ideological orientation and family income.

## Procedure

Data collection took place face-to-face in a classroom and each participant answered the instrument individually. We gave each participant a free and informed consent form that provided some information about the purpose of the study. This statement also guaranteed the voluntary nature and anonymity of participation. We complied with all ethical principles of the Brazilian National Health Council Resolution 510/16 on research involving human subjects in the human and social sciences. A Brazilian Research Ethics Committee has approved the present study under the registration number 3.667.067.

## Data Analysis

We analyzed the data using the statistical software SPSS - Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 23. We performed descriptive statistics, correlation, and Factor Analyses of the principal axes with Varimax rotation and ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) for repeated measures. Finally, we performed regression and moderation analyses using PROCESS Macro for SPSS, version 3.5 (Hayes, 2018). Moderation was performed with Model 1, and the bootstrapping parameter used was 5,000 samples. The standard error chosen was that of the regression coefficients.

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics (Table 2) show that participants tended to say they have little trust in most institutions. Most showed no or little trust in 12 out of 17 institutions. Non-governmental organizations were the institutions most trusted (80.2%), while political parties were the least trusted, with 92.9% of participants showing little or no trust in them.

In order to test the appropriateness of the measure of institutional trust in the present study, we conducted a factor analysis of the measure used, which yielded a KMO value of 0.82 and a significant Bartlett's Sphericity Test ( $\chi^2 [136] = 2381.47, p < .001$ ). The measure had a four-factor structure, and the explained variance was 61.54%, with eigenvalues of the extracted factors ranging from 1.01 to 3.98. The internal consistencies of the four generated factors varied between .63 and .83. In addition, we calculated a general trust index formed by reunifying all institutions in the measure, indicating the general tendency of participants to trust institutions. The internal consistency of the general trust was .78

The first factor that emerged from the factor analysis was called Civil Organizations. It includes civil society institutions such as NGOs, trade unions, student movements, popular movements and political parties. We called the second factor Social Coercion as it grouped the Federal Police,

Military Police, Armed Forces, Corporations and Churches. The third factor grouped TV and Radio, Newspapers and Magazines, and Digital Media, which is why we called it Media. Finally, the fourth factor organized trust in the institutions that make up the three branches of Brazilian's State - Executive, Legislative, and Judiciary - which is why we called it the State.

A repeated measures ANOVA showed that the means of the four types of trust were significantly different ( $F [3, 1068] = 71.17, p < .001, \eta^2 = .167$ ). Multiple comparisons showed that students relied significantly more on civil organizations than other factors ( $p < .001$ ). Moreover, as shown in Table 3, reliance on the state factor had the lowest mean.

Our first hypothesis was confirmed, which stated that BJW and trust in institutions would be positively correlated. The correlations presented (Table 3) confirm this hypothesis by showing that BJW is positively and significantly correlated with trust in social coercion, state institutions and the overall index of trust in institutions. This means that those who see the world as a just place to live are more likely to trust institutions, especially institutions of social coercion and the State.

Table 2  
Descriptive statistics of trust in each institution ( $N = 381$ ).

Institution	<i>M</i>	<i>DP</i>	Trust Level (%)	
			None/Little	Moderate/Too Much
1. Executive Branch	1.81	.71	84.4%	15.6%
2. Legislative Branch	1.83	.67	85.4%	14.6%
3. Judiciary Branch	2.15	.76	63.3%	36.4%
4. Political Parties	1.70	.60	92.9%	7.1%
5. Federal Police	2.60	.85	43.0%	57.0%
6. Military Police	2.14	.83	64.3%	35.7%
7. Armed Forces	2.20	.93	61.5%	38.5%
8. Corporations	1.82	.77	79.7%	20.3%
9. TV/Radio	1.86	.70	82.8%	17.2%
10. Magazines and Newspapers	2.14	.73	68.1%	31.9%
11. Digital Media	2.12	.69	71.4%	28.6%
12. Human Rights NGOs	2.98	.80	19.8%	80.2%
13. Unions	2.29	.77	59.8%	40.2%
14. Student Unions and Movements	2.57	.85	42.0%	58.0%
15. Popular Movements	2.69	.86	40.1%	59.9%
16. Residents' Associations	2.58	.80	43.7%	56.3%
17. Churches	2.10	.92	62.9%	37.1%

Table 3  
Means, standard deviations and correlations between BJW and institutional trust.

Constructs ( $\alpha$ )	<i>M</i>	<i>DP</i>	Bivariate Correlations and $\alpha$					
			1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	
1. BJW	2.85	.78	<b>.81</b>					
2. Civil Organizations	2.47	.57	-.09	<b>.82</b>				
3. Social Coercion	2.17	.67	.444**	-.100	<b>.83</b>			
4. Media	2.04	.58	.029	.380**	.102*	<b>.75</b>		
5. State	1.92	.54	.245**	.104*	.533**	.227**	<b>.63</b>	
6. General Trust	2.21	.37	.256**	.614**	.64**	.59**	.659**	

Note.  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha coefficient diagonally in the table; \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

The second hypothesis states that BJW, a right-wing political orientation and higher household income positively predict trust in institutions. The multiple regressions of this predictive model showed (Table 4) that BJW significantly and positively predicted trust in social coercion and the State. Political orientation, which we divided into left, center and right, was operationalized into two dummy variables: D1 (which compared left with the center) and D2 (which

compared left with right). D2 significantly predicted trust in social coercion, thus leading to people from the right wing having more trust in coercive institutions than people from the left wing. Family income was also divided into two dummies: low income (up to three minimum wages) and high income (over three minimum wages). We found that income differences significantly predicted trust in the media and the State. Higher incomes led to greater trust in these institutions.

Table 4  
Unstandardized regression coefficients predicting trust in institutions.

	Civil Orgs.		Social Coercion		Media		State	
	<i>B</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>
BJW	.09	.117	.28*	< .001	.04	.478	.18*	<.001
D1 (Left x Center)	-.02	.921	.16	.494	-.28	.272	.10	.641
D2 (Left x Right)	-.24	.498	1.36*	< .001	-.30	.457	.47	.172
Income (Low x High)	.35	.112	.24	.275	.54*	.023	.52*	.015
BJW*D1	-.09	.270	.07	.357	.09	.258	.01	.815
BJW*D2	-.15	.191	-.15	.189	-.02	.832	-.06	.554
BJW*Income	-.08	.246	-.04	.550	-.10	.211	-.14*	.047
	R <sup>2</sup> = .14		R <sup>2</sup> = .40		R <sup>2</sup> = .09		R <sup>2</sup> = .11	

We found that a right-wing attitude and higher income are related to the tendency to trust institutions, especially state institutions and social coercion. In comparison, a left-wing attitude and lower income do not predict trust. Thus, the rightist and with higher incomes have more trust in institutions, while those on the left and with lower incomes do not. We hypothesized that people on the left wing and with lower incomes would have more trust in the BJW if they showed high approval of the BJW. In order to understand how people on the left and with lower income may trust institutions, we examined their moderating role in the relationship between BJW and institutional trust using PROCESS Macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2018), version 3.5. Although Table 4 shows that there is a significant interaction between BJW and income only for the State factor, we conducted moderation analyses to better explore how the political positioning (left vs right) and family income (low and medium/high) moderate this predictive relationship between BJW and trust in institutions. In order to do this, we used political positioning and income as moderators. For each analysis, we controlled for age and gender as covariates.

With respect to trust in civil organizations, we found a significant interaction between BJW and income ( $b = -.15$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $p = .042$ ), and the relationship between BJW and trust in these institutions occurred in a negative sense for high-income individuals ( $b = -.16$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p = .006$ ), but not in a significant way for low-income individuals ( $b = -.001$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p = .915$ ). This means that a higher BJW was associated with the tendency of higher-income individuals to trust less the institutions that form the arc of civil organizations, such as social movements, trade unions and NGOs. When we looked at the participant's political positions, we found that this variable did not significantly affect the relationship between BJW and trust in civic organizations. Thus, the relationship did not depend on whether the participant belonged to the left or the right.

In predicting social coercion, we found that there was a non-significant interaction between BJW and D2 ( $b = -.15$ ,

$SE = .11$ ,  $p = .163$ ), but when we decompose the relationship between BJW and trust in social coercion, we see that the relationship is significant only for people on the left-wing ( $b = .30$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and not for people on the right-wing ( $b = .15$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $p = .155$ ). Thus, for people on the left to have more trust in coercive institutions, they had to have a high BJW. The relationship between BJW and trust in social coercion was significant for both income levels. That is, the relationship was independent of the participants' income.

The relationship between BJW and trust in media institutions was not moderated by income level ( $b = -.13$ ,  $EP = .07$ ,  $p = .085$ ) or political positioning ( $b = -.08$ ,  $EP = .12$ ,  $p = .460$ ) of the participants, since the interactions and decompositions of interactions did not result in significant effects ( $p > .05$ ). Likewise, regarding trust in the State, the results show a non-significant interaction between the BJW and the D2 ( $b = -.10$ ,  $EP = .10$ ,  $p = .339$ ). Despite this, we believe it is important to carry out an exploratory analysis to verify whether the relationship pattern between the BJW and trust in State institutions is really similar at the different levels of the participants' political positioning, as suggested by the absence of significant interaction. We verified, however, different patterns of relationship, since the relationship was significant for people on the left ( $b = .14$ ,  $EP = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and not significant for those on the right ( $b = .03$ ,  $EP = .10$ ,  $p = .701$ ). Therefore, the BJW was associated with the tendency of people on the left to trust state institutions, but not those on the right. So, when people on the right trust the State, this happens regardless of their BJW, but those on the left need the BJW to trust. Furthermore, we obtained a marginally significant interaction between BJW and income ( $b = -.13$ ,  $EP = .07$ ,  $p = .052$ ) on trust in the State, so that the relationship between BJW and trust in the State only occurred in people with low incomes ( $b = .21$ ,  $EP = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and not with higher income ( $b = .07$ ,  $EP = .05$ ,  $p = .147$ ). This means that in order to trust State institutions, low-income people and people on the left need to have high adherence to the belief that the world is a place where justice prevails.

Finally, for the relationship between BJW and the overall confidence index, we found that there was a non-significant interaction between BJW and D2 ( $b = -.11, SE = .08, p = .146$ ). However, decomposition of the interaction showed that the relationship between BJW and general trust in institutions was significant only for left-wing people ( $b = .12, SE = .02, p < .001$ ) and not for right-wing people ( $b = .004, SE = .08, p = .956$ ). In this sense, people on the left must have a high BJW to trust institutions. Moreover, the interaction between BJW and income was significant ( $b = -.11, SE = .04, p = .019$ )

in explaining general trust. Thus, the relationship between BJW and general institutional trust occurred significantly only among lower-income individuals ( $b = .16, SE = .03, p < .001$ ), but not among higher-income individuals ( $b = .04, SE = .05, p = .251$ ). In other words, BJW was positively associated with overall trust in institutions among people with lower incomes but not among people with higher incomes who could trust institutions regardless. We have thus confirmed the occurrence of the third hypothesis of the study.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the moderating role of income and political positioning variables in the relationship between belief in a just world and trust in institutions. The results showed, on the one hand, that the level of trust in most institutions was low, especially in those associated with the system of representative democracy, such as the legislature and political parties. On the other hand, average trust in institutions such as the armed forces was significantly higher than in democratic political institutions. This is a fact that, although repeated in research on institutional trust in Brazil (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2018; Datafolha, 2019), is nevertheless worrying because it may pose a threat to the stability of the democratic regime, especially in times of crisis and the strengthening of anti-democratic speech.

Overall, the study also found that BJW and trust in institutions are positively correlated, i.e., the higher the participants' BJW, the greater their trust in institutions. This result corroborates other studies that have also examined this relationship, such as Correia and Vala (2004) and Zhang and Zhang (2015). In addition, we found that a position on the right side of the political spectrum and higher income predicted institutional trust. In structurally unequal societies such as Brazil, this could be related to the fact that institutions treat people differently depending on their social class, and the richest are less likely to trust institutions (Ramos et al., 2016) because they are generally treated well and more favored by them. Moreover, as Catterberg and Moreno (2006) point out, this may also be because people in the higher socio-economic classes have an interest in maintaining the system as it is in order to preserve their privileged position in the social stratification.

We also found that the BJW significantly predicts trust in State institutions and social coercion. Since BJW is associated with maintaining the *status quo*, as the system is perceived to be fair and does not require major changes (Hafer & Sutton, 2016), it is understandable that it is associated with greater trust in institutions, many of which also serve this function. However, this relationship between BJW and trust was moderated by the participants' political positioning and economic status and was not present in all of them.

Moderation analysis revealed that income moderated the relationship between BJW and trust in the state and institutions. In these cases, BJW predicted institutional trust in people with lower incomes. So, suppose being on the right wing and having a higher income positively predicts trust, and BJW is unrelated to institutional trust in these people. In turn, BJW predicts institutional trust in people who come from the left-wing and have a lower income. In other words, it is as if people from lower classes needed a belief that made them perceive the world as just in order to trust institutions because only their socio-economic position could not predict trust.

There are many ways we can explain this phenomenon. We believe that it happens to lower-income people and not to higher-income people for the same reason that leads lower-income people to have high BJW: justification of the system (Thomas, 2018), in a process based on Dalbert (2001) and Otto et al. (2009), of assimilation of the unjust reality they believe they cannot change. Individuals in more vulnerable social contexts may perceive the system and reality they live in as more inescapable and, through a psychological defense mechanism such as reducing cognitive dissonance (Jost et al., 2003), begin to see the world as fair and meritocratic so as not to turn against this reality. This was also confirmed by Henry and Saul (2006), who found beliefs that justify the system are supported by people of low socio-economic status, who suffer the most from a particular system.

If they do not have a high BJW, left-wing and low-income people may not trust institutions because of conflicts of interest, but if they have a higher BJW, they may trust them because belief favors the perception of systems (and thus their institutions) as just, even when they work against their interests (Hafer & Sutton, 2016). In this sense, we understand that the Brazilian state has failed in meeting the needs of the most socially and economically vulnerable groups, so these people must have a high level of trust in the BJW to continue to trust it. For this reason, these people may respond to this paradox, i.e., they trust institutions that are not sympathetic to them and interpret reality with the prejudice that the world is essentially just and meritocratic.



As Furnham (1991) noted, in an unequal society, where most people believe that the world is a just place, socio-economic inequalities are seen as just, and the poor are assumed to have fewer resources because they really deserve less. In this respect, we understand the BJW as a legitimizing belief that leads to trust in institutions.

The same is true for people on the left-wing and on the right-wing. The moderation analyses revealed that political position also moderated the relationship between BJW and trust in the factors of social coercion, the state and general trust in institutions, so that a higher BJW led people on the left to trust these institutions, but not for people on the right. Traditionally, people with more conservative and right-wing political ideologies tend to trust institutions more (Ribeiro, 2011). These are positions that prioritize the preservation of the *status quo*.

This is also evidenced by the moderation of higher incomes in the relationship between BJW and trust in the group of institutions we have labeled civil organizations. Specifically in this case, the relationship between BJW and trust in these institutions was negative among higher income individuals. Thus, higher BJW was not associated with trust in the institutions of civil organizations, but with the distrust of them. Civil society institutions such as NGOs and people's movements focus on social change, which runs counter to the interests of the upper class, who may therefore not trust them.

People on the left-wing also seek profound social change (Sabbagh & Schmitt, 2016), based on the reading of the contemporary world as a place occupied by social injustices perpetuated by institutions. Therefore, the institutions of the state and social coercion tend to be perceived with more suspicion by those on the left. This study has shown that one of the ways in which people on the left-wing came to have greater trust in institutions was also the expression of greater BJW, even in institutions of coercion that the leftist position has traditionally criticized, such as the police, the armed forces and large corporations

It is possible, then, that joining the BJW have social implications in addition to individual motivation. These include legitimizing differences in socio-economic status between groups (Furnham, 1991; Silva et al., 2018) and legitimizing the socio-political system (Martin & Cohn, 2004; Ng & Allen, 2005). For people with high BJW, social inequalities are due to individual attitudes, as they perceive the world as fair, where people get what they deserve. Poor people would have less because they have not done enough to earn more. If the BJW only makes people with lower incomes, but not the wealthier, trust state institutions, then it is as if it hides for these people the idea that these institutions are not present in the frame of reference of the rule of law that Brazil claims to be.

However, it is possible that this phenomenon is typical of very unequal societies, where institutions seem to treat people differently, and of countries with more recent democratic

regimes (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Colen, 2010; Lima et al., 2018). It could be that societies that manage to maintain good levels of social well-being and quality of life for their entire population gain more trust in their institutions because of factors such as these, and that system-based beliefs need not operate in a way that disadvantages people by reinterpreting reality through institutions in order to trust institutions that do not give them much in return.

Perhaps one of the most extensive practical implications of this insight is that trust in institutions can lead to low political engagement because the system and institutions are not perceived as flawed and in need of change (Cichocka et al., 2018). Social problems are not seen as a consequence of their inefficiency or indifference. Although significant social and revolutionary changes occur in societies, the impetus that triggers them often comes not from the lower class but highly educated or reasonably wealthy individuals, such as the leaders of the French and American Revolutions, Gandhi or Che Guevara. It is possible that the system's justifying beliefs, which are widespread in the lower strata of society, help to explain why these changes are not driven by the working class itself when it can no longer tolerate the injustices of an unjust society (Henry & Saul, 2006; Jost et al., 2003). Thus, the result points to the possible existence of a mechanism that can "docile" individuals and dampen their willingness to act to change realities that may harm them. It is the idea contained in Lerner's (1980) concept of the fundamental delusion of BJW. Moreover, it is possible that in the general population, BJW adherence is even higher among people with lower incomes than in this study, as it was composed of university students. This may add another dimension to the phenomenon studied here.

Theoretically, the link between the BJW and the phenomenon of institutional trust has not been sufficiently explored in the academic literature. Moreover, in this study, we consider the BJW approach as a justifying and legitimizing belief in the system, an outdated and less used perspective than the classical motivational approach. The findings are innovative in exploring the impact of beliefs and perceptions of justice on trust in institutions, particularly in demonstrating the political and socio-economic factors. They have the potential to show how people who are disadvantaged due to socio-political, systemic and institutional problems or who come from groups that hold ideologies opposed to the current system come to trust institutions that are often perceived as inefficient in the face of these groups' demands.

This study is not without its limitations. First, we highlight that the sample consists entirely of university students and only a minority who identify as right-wing on the political spectrum. The general population is likely to differ in adherence and the determinants of BJW and institutional trust, making it impossible to generalize the results. Moreover, political positioning was only measured in terms of left, center and right, another important limitation.

In the future, further studies are needed to replicate the results described here in different and representative samples of the Brazilian population, including samples from different Brazilian regions and similar groups from the political spectrum. In addition, it is important to examine the influence of other variables that might attenuate the association between the BJW and trust in institutions, as

well as to investigate what other factors explain the possibly high trust in institutions of people from lower socioeconomic strata and the left, such as the level of religiosity. Above all, the most critical gap seems to be the question of how the BJW can perform the function of legitimizing systems and institutions, as this study points to this possibility through moderation.

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