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We Blame Innocent Victims More Than I Do: Self-Construal Level Moderates Responses to Just-World Threats

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This study investigated the impact of self-construal levels on people's tendency to blame innocent victims for the victims' fates. The authors hypothesized that when the belief in a just world is threatened, social self-construal is associated with more victim blaming than individual self-construal is. In Experiments 1 and 2, participants were primed with either the individual self (with the word I*) or the social self (with the word* we*). Results indeed showed that when threats to just-world beliefs were high, social self-activation produced more victim blaming than individual self-activation did. This effect was not found when just-world threats were low. Extending on these findings, Experiment 3 revealed that, following a just-world threat, an independent self-construal measure was negatively related to victim blaming, and an interdependent self-construal measure was positively related to victim blaming. It is concluded that self-construal levels are important to understanding the justice motive.*

Keywords: *victim blaming; self-construal level; just-world theory; justice motive*

Peple are motivated to perceive the surrounding social world as a just place where good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. This justice motive is at the core of just-world theory, which stipulates that people have a need to believe that people generally get what they deserve in life (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Lerner & Simmons, 1966; for recent reviews, see Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Ross & Miller, 2002). Social situations can pose a threat to this belief, such as when an innocent individual is severely harmed and continues to suffer following the incident that happened or when a perpetrator is not caught for the crime committed and thus unfairly escapes punishment (Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2007; Hafer, 2000a). Just-world theory predicts that, in situations of this sort, people seek to defend their belief that the world generally is a just place. Such just-world defense can take on various forms, such as defense in the form of action (e.g., endorsing revenge on the perpetrator; Kaiser, Vick, & Major, 2004) or cognition (e.g., psychologically reconstructing a moral transgression so that it no longer appears to be unjust; Lerner, 1980). A well-documented indication of this latter process can be found in people's responses to innocent victims of unjust events. An innocent victim of a harmful unjust event poses a threat to the belief that people usually get what they deserve, and people may hence buffer themselves against this psychological threat by assigning part of the blame to the victim. Consequently, innocent victims are no longer perceived as innocent, but instead, they are perceived as to some extent deserving of their fates. Thus, paradoxically, victim blaming originates from a concern for justice.

An important issue that has inspired justice research is why people have this need to defend themselves against the possibility that the world sometimes may not be just

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and, hence, may sometimes blame innocent victims. In answering this question, it is generally asserted that just-world beliefs constitute "fundamental delusions" that serve the psychological function to maintain or increase the extent to which people experience the social world as predictable and consistent (Lerner, 1980). In keeping with this desire to make sense of the social world, the dominant explanation of phenomena such as victim blaming is that upholding the belief in a just world validates people's confidence that it is useful for them to strive for long-term goals in life (see also Hafer, 2000b). As noted by Hafer and Bègue (2005), if people did not believe in a just world, there would be "little point in investing time, energy, and other resources in the hopes of obtaining the rewards one believes one deserves" (p. 130). This functionality of just-world beliefs is corroborated by findings that just-world beliefs are positively associated with psychological well-being (e.g., Dalbert, 1998; Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996). Furthermore, Lerner and Miller (1978) have suggested that victim blaming originates from self-oriented motives: When people observe injustices that happen to others, they need to shield themselves from the cognition that their own well-being is vulnerable to factors that are beyond their control. Such self-orientation in justice motivation was observed by Lerner and Miller when they remarked the following:

> People will be concerned primarily with their own world, the environment in which they must live and function. To witness and admit to injustices in other environments does not threaten people very much because these events have little relevance for their own fates. As events become closer to their world, however, the concern over injustices increases greatly, as does the need to explain or make sense of the events. (p. 1031)

This quote suggests that victim blaming originates from a desire to regulate and protect one's own well-being in response to unjust events that one perceives happening to others (Correia et al., 2007; see also IJzerman & Van Prooijen, 2008; Lambert, Burroughs, & Nguyen, 1999). Moreover, the implications for observers' well-being are more pronounced to the extent that they perceive themselves as more similar to the victim. Building on these insights, the present research sought to investigate the social-cognitive implications of this process by focusing on self-construal level, that is, the way people define themselves in relation to others. In particular, people can mentally define themselves in terms of their interpersonal relations and similarities with others, or they can define themselves in terms of their own unique features and their differences with others (e.g., Brewer, 1991). Here, we propose that such

levels of self-construal influence victim blaming in predictable ways. As such, the present research is designed to investigate core assumptions of just-world theory by empirically testing the relation between victim blaming and self-construal level. In the following, we more elaborately introduce the constructs that motivated the present contribution and derive our hypotheses.

SELF-CONSTRUAL LEVEL AND VICTIM BLAMING

People can conceive of themselves at various levels. The most common distinction of self-construal level is between the individual self and the social self. These levels of self-construal operate relatively independent from each other (e.g., Brewer, 1991; Gaertner, Sedikides, Vevea, & Iuzzini, 2002; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). The individual self is the part of the self-concept that differentiates the self from others and stresses the individual's uniqueness, and the social self is the part of the self-concept that assimilates the self with others and stresses similarities with other people. Both these self-conceptualizations are an integral part of people's self-concepts and can be made more or less accessible through contextual factors (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999; Stapel & Koomen, 2001; Van Prooijen & Zwenk, 2009). In addition, people can vary structurally in these levels of self-construal, which is evidenced by the fact that these two levels of self-construal are frequently assessed as individual difference variables (e.g., Singelis, 1994, who referred to these dimensions as independent vs. interdependent self-construal) or as cultural dimensions that correspond to the distinction between individualistic versus collectivistic cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991).

These distinctions between the individual (or independent) self versus the social (or interdependent) self can be expected to have implications for people's responses to various types of injustices that they perceive in their direct social environment. When the social self is salient, people are in a mind-set that assimilates the self with others. Such an assimilative mind-set is likely to increase the commitment that people feel toward others, who then psychologically are experienced as an extension of the self (Gardner, Gabriel, & Hochschild, 2002). A likely consequence of this process is that people are increasingly attentive to injustices that they observe happened to others. More specifically, social self-activation leads people to psychologically connect the self to others, and as a consequence, injustices done to others are likely to be indirectly experienced as targeted toward the self (Lerner & Miller, 1978; see also Smith & Citti, 2006).

Empirical research provides evidence that stronger social connections indeed increase the need for justice. For instance, Gollwitzer and Bücklein (2007) found evidence that social self-construals are associated with more punitive attitudes toward norm violators. These findings correspond to intergroup research that reveals a tendency for people to be more punitive toward ingroup than outgroup offenders (e.g., Kerr, Hymes, Anderson, & Weathers, 1995; Van Prooijen, 2006; Van Prooijen & Lam, 2007).

Such an increased need for justice is likely to hold implications for people's responses to innocent victims who are threatening to just-world beliefs. Social self-construal can make innocent victims seem particularly threatening to just-world beliefs by emphasizing the fact that similar others are vulnerable to uncontrollable harm, which reminds observers of the unpredictability of their own fates. Consistent with this line of reasoning, Correia et al. (2007) found that an innocent victim threatened just-world beliefs more if the victim was an ingroup than an outgroup member, as evidenced by results from a modified Stroop task (Hafer, 2000a). In a similar vein, Novak and Lerner (1968) investigated participants' responses to another participant who was similar or dissimilar to them in terms of various attitudes. Following the information that this similar or dissimilar other recently had suffered a mental breakdown, participants displayed avoidance behaviors particularly if the other was similar to them. Of importance, the main factor that is assumed to drive these effects is the cognitive similarity that people observe between the self and a stranger, not the emotional closeness that people may experience with a known victim—after all, it seems unlikely that people are more prone to blame emotionally close others (e.g., their spouses or children). Keeping this boundary condition in mind, the research findings reviewed here are consistent with our general argument that when people are in a mind-set that cognitively integrates the self with others, they are more in need to defend themselves against just-world threats. Based on this line of reasoning, it can be predicted that social self-construal leads to more victim blaming when confronted with a victim who is threatening to just-world beliefs.

A different pattern of results may be expected in the case of individual self-construal. Individual self-construal produces a mind-set that differentiates the self from others by emphasizing one's own uniqueness. Such focus on one's own individual attributes may lead observers not to experience the events that happened to others as threatening. It has been noted that people frequently do not experience injustices as threatening when they happen outside of their direct social environment. People are then able to maintain that their "own" world is just

and that the injustice that they perceived happened in a "different" world (see, e.g., the above quote by Lerner & Miller, 1978, p. 1031). Indeed, it is likely that a mind-set that differentiates the self from others produces a decreased need to defend the self against the observed injustice: One may infer that injustices are only likely to happen to people who are clearly different from themselves. This may even be somewhat reassuring, as it allows individuals to acknowledge the existence of injustice in the world, while simultaneously being able to believe in the justness of one's own direct social environment. As a consequence, threats to the just world may not be experienced as problematic when the individual self is activated, and hence, it can be predicted that individual self-construal weakens the potential for victim blaming. In three experiments, we tested these hypothesized effects of self-construal levels on victim blaming in response to just-world threats.

EXPERIMENT 1

In Experiment 1, we investigated the influence of various levels of self-construal on victim blaming by priming participants either with the word *I* (individual self-activation) or with the word *we* (social self-activation). Also, we added a third (control) condition to the self-construal manipulation in which neither the individual nor the social self was activated. The priming procedure that we used was developed in previous studies and has been shown to successfully elicit responses that are associated with the individual self versus the social self (see, e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Gardner et al., 1999; Stapel & Koomen, 2001; Van Prooijen & Zwenk, 2009).

Following the self-construal manipulation, participants were confronted with a description of a young woman who experienced a sexual assault. In this description, building on well-established just-world manipulations (e.g., Hafer, 2000a, 2000b; Lerner & Miller, 1978), we manipulated the extent to which the incident would be regarded as threatening to just-world beliefs by varying whether the suffering of the victim continued or ended (Hafer, 2000a, 2000b; Lerner & Miller, 1978). The idea behind this procedure is that information that the suffering of a victim ended resolves the initial just-world threat of the victimization incident to some extent: After all, such information suggests that the victim was not harmed dramatically, enabling people to reconcile the victimization incident with their implicit belief that "truly" bad things do not happen to good people—even though good people can be somewhat unfortunate occasionally. In the low just-world threat condition, participants were informed that, because of the help of her

friends, the young woman recovered well soon after the incident. In the high just-world threat condition, no such information was provided, suggesting that the woman continued to suffer (e.g., Hafer, 2000b). Based on the line of reasoning described above, we anticipated that the self-construal manipulation would influence victim blaming, especially in the condition where the victim was threatening to just-world beliefs (i.e., the condition where participants did not receive information about the victim's recovery). In particular, we predicted that social self-activation would lead to more victim blaming than individual self-activation would when the victim posed a high threat to just-world beliefs.

Method

Participants and design. We assigned 115 participants (36 men, 79 women; age *M* = 20.57, *SD* = 3.36) randomly to the conditions of a 3 (self-construal activation: *I* vs. *we* vs. control) × 2 (just-world threat: low vs. high) factorial design. Participants were recruited using flyers in the VU University student cafeterias. The experiment was followed by two other, unrelated studies. The three studies together lasted approximately 20 minutes, and participants were paid €2.50 for their participation.

Procedure. Upon entry in the laboratory, participants were seated in separate cubicles. Each cubicle contained a personal computer, monitor, and keyboard that were used to present the stimulus information and to register the data. Participants were told that they would participate in two separate studies. The first study was presented as a reading exercise. This reading exercise contained the self-construal manipulation. Building on earlier studies that successfully used similar operationalizations of self-activation (e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Gardner et al., 1999; Stapel & Koomen, 2001; Van Prooijen & Zwenk, 2009), participants were asked to read a text about a trip to the city. In the *I* condition, this text was written in the first-person singular (e.g., "I love the city. To me, the city is a place to enjoy. . . ."). In the *we* condition, the text was written in the first-person plural (e.g., "We love the city. To us, the city is a place to enjoy. . . ."). Following earlier studies, participants in both conditions were instructed to count and indicate the total number of personal pronouns in the text (both conditions contained an equal number of personal pronouns). In the control condition, all personal pronouns in the text were replaced by a string of letters (e.g., "ABC loves the city. To XYZ, the city is a place to enjoy. . . . ") or by the word *it*. Participants in the control condition were instructed to count and indicate the total number of times these strings of letters, in conjunction with the word *it,* appeared in the text.

After the reading exercise, participants continued with the second study in which they read a text that described how a young woman (Jolanda) suffered an unpleasant sexual experience. The text in the high just-world threat condition read as follows:

> Jolanda is at a party where she meets a boy. Jolanda and the boy start flirting passionately. They have a lot of fun together and drink several glasses of wine. When the party comes to an end, the boy offers to bring Jolanda home. However, instead of driving her straight home, the boy stops the car when they are driving through a park. Despite the fact that Jolanda tries to resist him, the boy tries to have sex with Jolanda. Eventually, the attempt of the boy to have sex with Jolanda fails, but Jolanda has experienced this incident as a sexual assault. After this incident, the boy brings Jolanda home.

In the low just-world threat condition, the final sentence of this text was extended with the following information:

> After this incident, the boy brings Jolanda home, where she is being taken care of by her roommates. They help Jolanda, and consequently, Jolanda suffers less because of this incident and, eventually, recovers reasonably well soon after the incident.

To measure victim blaming, we asked participants to indicate to what extent they agreed with the following four statements: "I believe that what happened to Jolanda was caused by her own behavior," "I believe that Jolanda is responsible herself for what happened to her," "I think Jolanda deserved what happened to her," and "I think Jolanda has been very careless" (1 = *strongly disagree,* 7 = *strongly agree*). These items were averaged into a reliable victim-blaming scale (α = .71). The manipulation was checked with the following question: "Jolanda recovered well soon after this incident" (1 = *strongly disagree,* 7 = *strongly agree*). After this, participants were debriefed, thanked, and paid for participation.

Results and Discussion

Sex of participant. Including the sex of the participants as an independent variable in the analyses of all three experiments reported here yielded no main or interaction effects on the manipulation checks or dependent variables. Although sex effects on victim blaming are sometimes found (e.g., Kleinke & Meyer, 1990), these effects are generally not very reliable (Hafer & Bègue, 2005), and the present three experiments revealed no reliable sex effects.[1]

Manipulation check. The check of the just-world threat manipulation was analyzed with a 3 (self-construal

TABLE 1: Means and Standard Deviations of Reported Victim Blaming as a Function of Self-Construal Activation and Just-World Threat (Experiment 1)

| Just-World Threat | Self-Construal Activation | | | | | |
| | I | | Control | | We | |
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Low	3.41	1.16	3.20	1.09	3.06	1.18
High	2.71	0.81	3.23	1.15	3.63	1.26

NOTE: Higher means indicate more victim blaming.

activation) × 2 (just-world threat) analysis of variance (ANOVA). This analysis yielded only the predicted main effect of the just-world manipulation, $F(1, 109) = 36.00$, $p < .001$. Participants in the low-threat condition were more in agreement with the statement that Jolanda recovered well after the incident ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.38$) than were participants in the high-threat condition ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.24$). These findings suggest that participants perceived the just-world manipulation as intended.

Victim blaming. The means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 1. A 3 × 2 ANOVA revealed the predicted interaction only, $F(2, 109) = 3.15$, $p < .05$. Simple main effect analyses indicated that the level of self-construal activation exerted no influence on victim blaming when just-world threat was low, $F < 1$. When just-world threat was high, however, self-construal activation significantly influenced victim blaming, $F(2, 109) = 3.14$, $p < .05$. We then conducted contrast analyses within the high just-world threat conditions. Supporting our hypothesis, these analyses indicated that participants in the individual self condition reported less victim blaming than did participants in the social self condition, $F(1, 109) = 6.24$, $p < .02$ (see Table 1). The contrast that pitted the individual self condition against the control condition was not significant, $F(1, 109) = 1.87$, $p > .17$, nor was the contrast of the social self condition against the control condition, $F(1, 109) = 1.21$, $p > .27$. These latter analyses indicated that the level of victim blaming in the control condition was intermediate between the individual and social self conditions, which suggests that both the individual and social self conditions contributed to their relative difference in victim blaming.

The results supported our hypotheses such that social self-activation produced more victim blaming than individual self-activation did in situations where a victim is threatening to just-world beliefs. Furthermore, no effects of self-construal activation were found in the condition where the victim was not threatening to just-world beliefs, which is consistent with the theoretical framework presented here given that participants are not strongly in need of reestablishing a sense of justice in the low-threat condition (Hafer, 2000a). As such, the level of blaming among participants in the low-threat condition is not likely to depend on just-world defensive processes but, rather, on other characteristics of the situation that were held constant across conditions (e.g., the fact that the victim initially flirted with the boy in the scenario).

EXPERIMENT 2

The results of Experiment 1 were promising, and hence, we conducted a second experiment to establish the robustness of the findings. In this second experiment, we tested the same hypothesis when participants were confronted with a different just-world threat. Participants were confronted with a description of a young woman who was violently robbed of her handbag. Following Hafer (2000a), we manipulated the extent to which the incident would be regarded as threatening to just-world beliefs by varying whether the perpetrator was caught. This procedure varies whether the initial threat to the just world posed by the robbery was resolved by providing information that the perpetrator got what he deserved (i.e., bad things happening to bad people), partially rectifying the injustice of the incident. In the low-threat condition, participants read that the perpetrator was caught and handed over to the police; in the high-threat condition, participants did not receive this information, suggesting that the offender was not caught.

Method

Participants and design. A total of 108 participants (32 men, 76 women; age $M = 20.58$, $SD = 2.62$) were assigned randomly to the conditions of a 3 (self-construal activation: *I* vs. *we* vs. control) × 2 (just-world threat: low vs. high) factorial design. Participants were recruited using flyers in the cafeterias of the VU University Amsterdam. The experiment was preceded by a different, unrelated study. The two studies lasted approximately 30 minutes, and participants were paid €3.50 for participation.

Procedure. Participants were welcomed in the same laboratory as in Experiment 1 and again participated in two ostensibly unrelated studies. The self-construal manipulation (Study 1) was the same as in Experiment 1. After the reading exercise, participants continued with Study 2, in which they were presented with a text that described the victimization of a woman (Jeanette). This description contained the manipulation of just-world threat. The description read as follows:

After a night out on the town, Jeanette is waiting for the night bus at 4 a.m. Her friends had offered to drive her home safely, but Jeanette did not believe that to be necessary given that she frequently takes the night bus home. She is standing next to a good-looking boy to whom she smiles briefly. The bus arrives and all the people who were waiting step into the bus. Jeanette takes her purse out of her handbag to show her ticket to the bus driver and finds a place to sit. She puts her purse back into her handbag, checks whether she still has her keys, and takes out her mobile phone to call some friends. When the bus stops, Jeanette walks the last few blocks home. Right before arriving at her front door, she suddenly is hit on her head from behind and falls to the floor. Her handbag is pulled out of her hands, and just before going unconscious, she sees the boy from the bus stop running away with her handbag.

In the low-threat condition, the following information was added to this description:

> As Jeanette regained consciousness, two men were help-
> ing her who, as it turned out, had seen everything, had
> stopped the perpetrator, and had turned him over to the
> police.

In the high-threat condition, this sentence was not added, and hence, the perpetrator had not been caught in that condition (Hafer, 2000a).

Participants then were posed a number of questions regarding the text they just read. To measure victim blaming, participants responded to the following two questions: "I think that Jeanette has been very careless" and "I believe that Jeanette behaved foolishly" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). These two items were averaged into a reliable victim-blaming scale (α = .80). To check the manipulation of just-world threat, participants responded to three items (1 = *certainly not*, 7 = *certainly*): "Do you believe the perpetrator will receive his just deserts?" "Do you think the perpetrator will be punished?" and "Do you think that the perpetrator will get the punishment he deserves?" (α = .92). After this, participants were informed that the study had ended. They were debriefed, thanked, and paid for their participation.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. The manipulation check of the just-world threat manipulation was analyzed by means of a 3 (self-construal activation) × 2 (just-world threat) ANOVA. This analysis yielded the predicted main effect of the just-world threat manipulation only, $F(1, 102) = 13.47, p < .001$. Participants in the low-threat condition believed it to be more likely that the perpetrator would get what he deserves ($M = 5.22, SD = 1.21$) than did

TABLE 2: Means and Standard Deviations of Reported Victim Blaming as a Function of Self-Construal Activation and Just-World Threat (Experiment 2)

| | Self-Construal Activation | | | | | |
| | I | | Control | | We | |
Just-World Threat	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Low	2.84	1.50	2.31	1.27	3.13	1.67
High	2.19	0.99	3.11	1.65	4.08	1.59

NOTE: Higher means indicate more victim blaming.

participants in the high-threat condition ($M = 4.21, SD = 1.64$). Perceptions of deservingness are at the core of just-world beliefs (Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Lerner, 1980), and hence, these findings suggest that participants perceived the manipulation of just-world threat as intended.

Victim blaming. The means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 2. A 3 × 2 ANOVA on the victim-blaming scale revealed a significant main effect of self-construal activation, $F(2, 102) = 5.73, p < .01$. Post hoc testing (Tukey's HSD test) indicated that victim blaming was higher following activation of the social self ($M = 3.61, SD = 1.68$) as compared to activation of the individual self ($M = 2.53, SD = 1.30$) and the control condition ($M = 2.70, SD = 1.51$; $ps < .05$). The individual self condition did not differ significantly from the control condition ($p = .88$).

More important was the finding that this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction effect, $F(2, 102) = 3.32, p < .05$. Similar to Experiment 1, self-construal activation did not influence victim blaming when the threat to just-world beliefs was low, $F(2, 102) = 1.49, p > .23$, and it did significantly influence victim blaming when the threat to just-world beliefs was high, $F(2, 102) = 7.48, p < .01$. We then conducted contrast analyses to establish which of the self-construal activation conditions differed within the high just-world threat condition. The contrast between the individual versus social self conditions was significant, $F(1, 102) = 14.96, p < .001$, indicating that activation of the social self produced more victim blaming in comparison with activation of the individual self following a just-world threat (see Table 2). The contrast of the control condition versus the social self condition was significant, $F(1, 102) = 4.10, p < .05$, and the contrast of the control condition versus the individual self condition approached significance, $F(1, 102) = 3.60, p = .06$. Thus, relative to the control condition, a threat to just-world beliefs increased victim blaming following social self activation, and it tended to decrease victim blaming following individual self activation.

The results of Experiment 2 were generally consistent with the findings observed in Experiment 1. Again, when confronted with a victim who is threatening to just-world beliefs, participants were more inclined to blame the victim when the social self was activated than when the individual self was activated. Furthermore, victim blaming in the control condition was again intermediate between the individual and social self conditions in response to a just-world threat. In Experiment 2, these differences were more pronounced than in Experiment 1 in that participants in the control condition differed significantly from the individual and social self conditions in reported victim blaming. A possible explanation for this is that the nature of the offense and the just-world threat manipulation in Experiment 2 may have constituted a more severe threat to participants' just-world beliefs than in Experiment 1. As a consequence, there was more leeway given in the self-construal activation manipulation to influence victim blaming when the threat to just-world beliefs was high. Finally, self-construal activation again did not influence victim blaming in the condition where the victim posed a low threat to just-world beliefs. In sum, evidence for the hypotheses replicated across two different types of just-world threat, suggesting that the present findings are robust manifestations of the influence of social versus individual self-construal activation on victim blaming. To further extend these findings, we conducted a third experiment.

EXPERIMENT 3

Experiment 3 was designed to extend the previous findings in two significant ways. First, in Experiments 1 and 2, the hypotheses were tested by activating social and individual levels of self-construal in a rather abstract way. To determine whether the hypothesis is corroborated using a different operationalization of self-construal level, in Experiment 3 we assessed the self-construal scales by Singelis (1994). These self-construal scales constitute a relatively less abstract conceptualization than the priming procedure used in Experiments 1 and 2, given that the Singelis scales refer to ingroup members who are personally known by the participant (importantly, in our experiment these known ingroup members did *not* pertain to the victim, given that the scales were measured in advance and were presented as a separate study). As such, these scales provide a more concrete operationalization of the constructs of interest here by measuring the extent to which people structurally emphasize their uniqueness from known others (independent self-construal) and their connectedness with known others (interdependent self-construal) as two separate dimensions. The self-construal scales converge with the more

generic priming procedure of Experiments 1 and 2 by focusing on the extent to which people assimilate versus differentiate the self with others. Indeed, a recent empirical study found that the self-construal scales and primes showed interactive effects in a way that suggests these dispositional and situational variables to be functionally equivalent (Gollwitzer & Bücklein, 2007, Experiment 2). Furthermore, like the self-construal primes in Experiments 1 and 2 (Gardner et al., 1999), the self-construal scales are closely associated with cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism (Singelis, 1994). These considerations support the assumption that the self-construal scales and self-construal primes have convergent validity and that both procedures are useful to gather insights in the psychological consequences of how the self is construed in relation to others. Hence, these scales are well suited to test whether the processes that we hypothesized in the introduction materialize in a different research setting.

The second contribution of Experiment 3 is to further examine what level of self-construal is the dominant force driving the effects: Is the social self increasing the potential for victim blaming, is the individual self decreasing the potential for victim blaming, or both? Given that independent and interdependent self-construal are measured as separate dimensions, Experiment 3 is likely to reveal evidence of what level of self-construal shapes the blaming of victims. Building on our line of reasoning laid out in the introduction, and informed by the findings of Experiments 1 and 2, we expected that both levels of self-construal would exert independent effects on victim blaming. Thus, we expected that, in response to a just-world threat, high levels of independent self-construal would be associated with less victim blaming, and high levels of interdependent self-construal would be associated with more victim blaming.

Method

Participants and design. A total of 105 participants (41 men, 64 women; age $M = 20.82$, $SD = 3.97$) answered the independent and interdependent self-construal measures (Singelis, 1994) as our continuous independent variables and were assigned randomly to one of the conditions of our just-world threat manipulation (low vs. high threat). The participants were again recruited using flyers in the student cafeterias of VU University Amsterdam. The experiment was preceded and followed by other, unrelated studies. Together, the studies lasted approximately 1 hour, and participants were paid €7 for participation.

Procedure. The experiment took place in the same laboratory as in Experiments 1 and 2. The experiment

was presented as two separate studies. In Study 1, we measured independent and interdependent self-construal by means of the Singelis (1994) self-construal scales. These scales are composed of two validated 12-item scales designed to measure independent and interdependent self-construal. Example items of the independent self-construal scale are "I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects" and "I act the same way no matter who I am with" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The 12 items were averaged into a scale with a Cronbach's alpha that was acceptable for the current purposes (α = .65; see Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Example items of the interdependent self-construal scale are "My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me" and "I will stay in a group if they need me, even when I am not happy with the group" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). These 12 items were averaged into a reliable scale (α = .77). The independent and interdependent self-construal scales were moderately and positively correlated (r = .30, p < .01).

After this, participants continued with Study 2, in which they were confronted with the same description, containing the same just-world threat manipulation, as in Experiment 2. To get an indication of the robustness of the present findings, we examined whether the hypotheses could be corroborated on a different indicator of victim blaming. Hence, participants responded to two different items than in Experiment 2: "I believe that Jeanette behaved irresponsibly in her situation" and "I believe that Jeanette should have known better" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). These two items were averaged into a victim-blaming scale with acceptable reliability (α = .67; see Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).[2] To check the manipulation of just world threat, the same three questions as in Experiment 1 were posed (α = .91). Participants were then informed that the experiment was ended. They were debriefed, thanked, and paid for their participation.

Results and Discussion

Statistical analyses. The results were analyzed by means of hierarchical regression analyses. Following Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003), the independent and interdependent self-construal scales were centered, and the conditions of the just-world threat manipulation were effect coded (–1 for the low-threat condition and 1 for the high-threat condition). The two predicted interaction terms (Independent Self-Construal × Just-World Threat and Interdependent Self-Construal × Just-World Threat) were based on the products of the centered self-construal scales and the effect-coded just-world threat manipulation. The three main effects were specified in Step 1, and in Step 2 the two interaction terms were added to the regression model.

TABLE 3: Results From Regression Analyses: Victim Blaming as a Function of Independent Self-Construal, Interdependent Self-Construal, and Victim Blaming (Experiment 3)

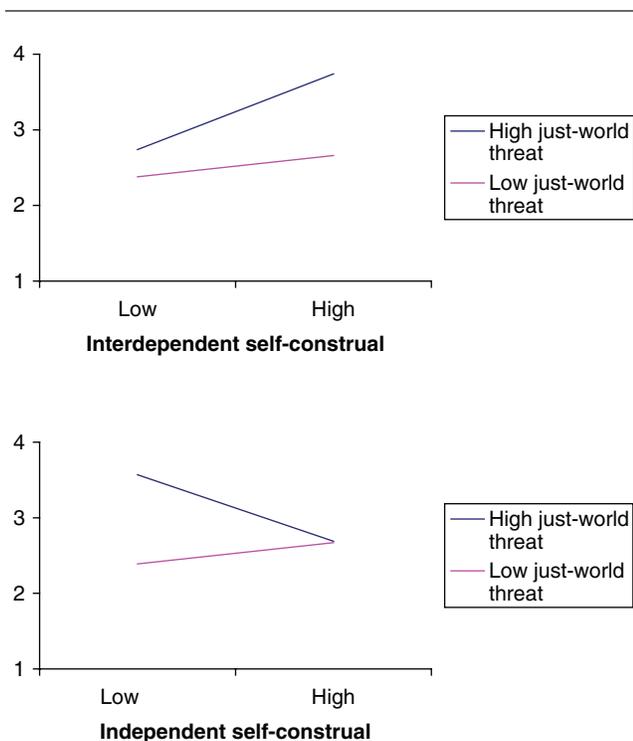| Predictor		
Step 1	β	t(*101*)
Just-world threat	.25	2.62*
Independent self-construal	–.11	–1.12
Interdependent self-construal	.21	2.11*
Step 2	β	t(*99*)
Independent Self-Construal × Just-World Threat	–.27	–2.65**
Interdependent Self-Construal × Just-World Threat	.21	2.04*

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Manipulation check. The analysis on the manipulation check revealed that only Step 1 was significant, $F(3, 101)$ = 18.10, p < .001 (R^2 = .35). As expected, only the just-world threat main effect was significant (β = –57, p < .001). Participants in the low-threat condition considered it to be more likely that the perpetrator would get what he deserved (M = 5.38, SD = 1.21) than did participants in the high-threat condition (M = 3.43, SD = 1.51). This finding suggests that participants perceived the manipulation of just-world threat as intended.

Victim blaming. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis are displayed in Table 3. Step 1 was significant, $F(3, 101)$ = 3.58, p < .02 (R^2 = .10). As can be seen in Table 3, both the manipulation of just-world threat and the interdependent self-construal scale exerted significant effects on victim blaming. More important was the finding that Step 2 also was significant, $F(2, 99)$ = 4.42, p < .02 (ΔR^2 = .07). As can be seen in Table 3, both predicted interactions were significant. The two interactions are displayed graphically in Figure 1. Both interactions were further examined by means of simple slopes analyses.

The *interdependent* Self-Construal × Just-World Threat interaction indicated that the interdependent self-construal scale had a positive influence on victim blaming when just-world threat was high (β = .28, p < .05), and it did not influence victim blaming when just-world threat was low (β = .12, p = .38). As predicted, higher scores on the interdependent self-construal scale were associated with higher levels of victim blaming in response to a just-world threat.

The *independent* Self-Construal × Just-World Threat interaction showed that the independent self-construal scale had a negative influence on victim blaming when just-world threat was high (β = –.27, p < .06), and it did not influence victim blaming when just-world threat

Figure 1 Interdependent Self-Construal × Just-World Threat and Independent Self-Construal × Just-World Threat interactions on victim blaming—Experiment 3.

was low ($\beta = .12$, $p = .38$). In accordance with predictions, higher scores on the independent self-construal scale were associated with lower levels of victim blaming in response to a just-world threat. These findings correspond to the hypothesis and the findings of Experiments 1 and 2.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Results of three experiments support the hypothesis that various levels of self-construal influence victim blaming in response to just-world threats. Experiments 1 and 2 both revealed that, when confronted with a victim who poses a threat to just-world beliefs, activating the social self by means of a priming procedure produced higher levels of victim blaming than activating the individual self. Furthermore, Experiment 3 replicated these findings by means of the most popular and well-known measure of individual differences pertaining to these self-construal levels (Singelis, 1994). This replication underscores the assertion of previous research that these individual difference measures have convergent validity with the priming procedures of Experiments 1 and 2 (Gollwitzer & Bücklein, 2007) and provides further support for the notion that both self-construal levels exert

independent effects on victim blaming. Taken together, these results provide solid support for the theoretical proposition that self-construal level predicts victim blaming in response to just-world threats.

By integrating literature on self-construal level with literature on just-world beliefs, the present research sought to increase understanding into the underlying reasons why people sometimes blame innocent victims for the victims' fates. The specific contribution of the experiments presented herein is twofold. First, the results presented here suggest that both self-construal levels exert independent effects on victim blaming. This was particularly evident in Experiment 3, wherein the individual and social self were measured as two separate dimensions, and both dimensions influenced victim blaming in predictable ways. These findings are consistent with arguments that the individual and social selves are mental representations that operate relatively independent from each other (e.g., Brewer, 1991; Gaertner et al., 2002; Stapel & Koomen, 2001). The theoretical implication of this is that victim blaming is a multidimensional self-regulatory process that depends in flexible ways on how people define themselves in relation to the surrounding social world. Second, the experiments revealed that differentiated versus assimilative mind-sets, which were either primed as abstract representations or measured as individual difference variables, influence victim blaming in ways that are consistent with the idea that the justice motive essentially is a self-oriented motive (Lambert et al., 1999; Montada, 1998). In particular, the findings presented here are consistent with a model in which people blame victims in order to psychologically cope with the idea that they themselves might also be vulnerable to uncontrollable harm (Lerner & Miller, 1978). This reasoning provides a parsimonious explanation for the finding that stimulating perceptions of similarity with others (by activating the social self) leads to a stronger rejection of victims who are threatening to just-world beliefs and that stimulating perceptions of uniqueness from others (by activating the individual self) decreases the potential for victim blaming.

At a broader theoretical level, this latter implication is in line with accumulating evidence that justice-based reasoning is shaped substantially by self-oriented concerns. That is, different research studies suggest that decisional outcomes, decision-making procedures, or other solutions to a variety of social problems are considered to be more just to the extent that they hold more positive implications for the evaluator, either in material or immaterial terms (e.g., Epley & Caruso, 2004; Ham & Van den Bos, 2008; Hegtvedt, 2006; Messick & Sentis, 1979; Thompson & Loewenstein, 1992; Van Prooijen, 2008; Van Prooijen et al., 2008). The present findings are consistent with these arguments in that victim-blaming

responses appear to originate from observers' concern to protect the self from the cognition that they too might be vulnerable to uncontrollable harm. Although speculative, one might argue that people are not consciously aware that they reject innocent victims to protect themselves from these unwanted cognitions. Such reasoning converges with original conceptions of just-world beliefs, as these beliefs are considered to be an implicit assumption that people are not consciously aware of (Correia et al., 2007; Hafer, 2000a; Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Lerner, 1980). In addition, recent empirical evidence has revealed that justice-based situations stimulate automatic and implicit activation of justice motivation, particularly if a given situation is self-relevant to perceivers, further suggesting that people are not necessarily consciously aware of the self-oriented nature of their justice motivation (Ham & Van den Bos, 2008). These findings underscore that justice-based reasoning is rooted in implicit self-focused mental processes (cf. Lerner, 2003; Lerner & Miller, 1978).

Across three experiments, results revealed no main effects of the just-world threat manipulation on victim blaming. This finding reflects a continuing puzzle in just-world research: Researchers sometimes find main effects of just-world threat manipulations, but at other times, they only find two-way interactions (for an overview, see Hafer & Bègue, 2005). These two-way interactions, then, often take the form of the justice motive being evident only in the condition where participants' beliefs in a just world are threatened (e.g., Hafer, 2000b). Although we do not claim nor aim to provide a definitive solution to this puzzle, we suspect that victim-blaming responses are sensitive to what we tentatively call "hidden ceiling effects." In particular, we speculate that there often are substantial psychological limits to the maximum amount of blame that people are willing to assign to victims. Even when a victim arguably behaved somewhat carelessly, people may still recognize that victims usually do not deliberately choose to harm themselves. As a consequence, participants may be reluctant to score extremely high on measures of victim blaming, even when just-world beliefs are threatened. Thus, the scale ceiling may be "hidden," as it is not at the scale end. In keeping with this line of reasoning, the mean victim-blaming responses that are found in empirical research often are around the scale midpoint and rarely take the form of extremely high scores (e.g., around 6 on a 7-point scale). Also in the present experiments, we found evidence that participants were reluctant to give high ratings on our measures of victim blaming.[3] As such, it is possible that participants in the low-threat condition reported blaming responses that left little room to find an increase in victim blaming in the high-threat condition. These considerations, however, do not compromise the main conclusion of the present contribution, which is that self-construal levels influence victim blaming in predictable ways when the belief in a just world is threatened.

The present findings are consistent with previous findings in which a sense of connectedness with others increased a concern for justice when observing social transgressions (e.g., Correia et al., 2007; Gollwitzer & Bücklein, 2007; Kerr et al., 1995; Novak & Lerner, 1968; Van Prooijen, 2006; Van Prooijen & Lam, 2007). This is not to say, however, that all forms of connectedness to others increase a concern for justice in all possible situations. For instance, the present findings pertain to a mind-set that leads people to seek cognitive similarity with—or uniqueness from—others while evaluating a victim who is a stranger. It is doubtful whether these findings generalize to instances where people evaluate a victim that they know and care about. Indeed, Loewenstein and Small (2007) argued that feeling emotionally close to a victim stimulates feelings of sympathy, which is likely to decrease blaming. Furthermore, a recent empirical study indicated that people are more willing to compensate a victim for the harm done when they experience emotional proximity to the victim (Van Prooijen, in press). Thus, the conclusions of the present research only pertain to the influence of self-construal level when evaluating unknown victims. Another boundary condition is that when people are victimized themselves, subsequent feelings of injustice may be associated with the individual self because victimization may lead people to feel that the perpetrator disrespects them for their own unique attributes. Recent empirical studies indeed found associations between justice concerns and individual self-activation when people were targeted themselves by acts of justice or injustice (Loseman, Miedema, Van den Bos, & Vermunt, 2009; Loseman, Van den Bos, & Ham, 2005; Van Prooijen & Zwenk, 2009). These recent findings, in conjunction with the present findings, may suggest an actor–observer difference in the relation between self-construal activation and justice considerations, such that social self-activation increases people's concern for justice when they are observers, and individual self-activation increases people's concern for justice when they are the target of just or unjust acts. Future research may more directly examine this possibility.

The hypotheses were tested by means of brief descriptions of offense deeds. This procedure is reminiscent of the distinction between "high" versus "low" impact stimuli to elicit just-world threats, which means that experimental stimuli need to be emotionally involving (high impact) in order to arouse concerns about justice. Lerner (1980, 2003) assumed that low-impact stimuli are problematic because they stimulate normative responses

of how participants believe they should, or are expected to, behave (i.e., demand characteristics). These arguments have been taken to favor the use of vivid stimulus materials, such as videotaped recordings, instead of written descriptions (e.g., Hafer & Bègue, 2005). We disagree with this perspective in two ways. First, although we concur that stimuli need to be emotionally involving to elicit justice reasoning, it would be unjustified to dismiss the use of written descriptions as appropriate stimulus materials. In everyday life, people's justice concerns can be aroused very easily by short pieces of written text (e.g., newspaper articles or even fiction). Emotional involvement can be attained quite well with a brief but realistic description in which participants are able to imagine the victim's perspective. Second, the main risk of emotionally uninvolving stimulus materials (low impact) is null results, not demand characteristics. When situations are not emotionally involving, no justice-based reasoning is likely to emerge, leading researchers to not find evidence for hypotheses concerning justice-based psychological processes. Most experimental situations are far too abstract for participants to be able to guess what the experimenter might expect from them. It has been remarked that social psychologists tend to overestimate the risk of demand characteristics in laboratory experiments (Berkowitz & Donnerstein, 1982). As to the current research, it is hard to see how (for instance) the priming procedure of Experiments 1 and 2 could have possibly manipulated participants' perception of what type of response the experimenter might expect from them. All in all, it is safe to conclude that the current stimulus materials were sufficiently involving to elicit genuine justice motivation.

CONCLUSION

The present findings fit into a research tradition that seeks to examine one of the most paradoxical consequences of people's desire for justice, namely, the blaming of innocent victims. By empirically connecting victim blaming to common manipulations and measures of self-construal level, three experiments provided support for core assumptions of the just-world theory. As such, whereas the social self sometimes may be associated with "prosocial" implications of justice concerns (such as punishment of offenders), at other times it may be associated with relatively more detrimental implications of the justice motive (i.e., the blaming of innocent victims). Taken together, it can be concluded that the way observers define themselves in relation to others predicts how they respond to victims who are threatening to the basic assumption that the world is a just place.

NOTES

1. It is noteworthy that in our experiments the target victim was female, and hence, based on our theoretical argument one might expect more blaming among women when the just world is threatened. This two-way interaction between participants' sex and the just-world threat manipulation, however, did not approach significance in any experiment, all Fs < 1. Furthermore, no reliable trends could be observed in the high-threat condition: for Experiment 1, male $M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.13$, female $M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.18$; for Experiment 2, male $M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.88$, female $M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.51$; for Experiment 3, male $M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.07$, female $M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.51$. In all likelihood, categorizations based on sex instigate psychological processes that are relatively more complex than only experiencing a sense of cognitive similarity, particularly when a female is being victimized by a male. For instance, female participants may experience such a victimization as targeted at females in general, producing identity threats in conjunction with emotional reactions such as increased anger at the male perpetrator and feelings of empathy with the victim. These relatively more complex psychological dynamics may obscure the impact of the cognitive similarity that female participants experience with the female victim. In addition, it can be noted that in all experiments the number of male participants was relatively low, further obscuring possible sex effects. Given the statistical nonsignificance of this factor, in all the analyses reported below we dropped sex of the participant as independent variable.

2. Although we are unsure why the alpha level for the victim-blaming scale was relatively low in Experiment 3, it is noteworthy that dropping only one outlier out of the data was sufficient to raise the alpha level to .70, while both predicted interactions remained significant ($ps < .05$). Given that this consideration holds no implications for the final interpretation of the results, we report the analyses of the entire sample in this article.

3. In Experiment 1, only 5.2% of the sample scored above 5.0 on the averaged victim-blaming measure, in Experiment 2 this was 9.3% of the sample, and in Experiment 3 this was only 4.8%.

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