

It's Not Safe to Believe in a Just World

Last month my *ISHN* article described an incident of a teenage girl getting verbally and physically abused in a restaurant, with no one intervening on her behalf—not even her aunt or uncle. Barriers to helping the victim in this context were discussed and related to people's reluctance to intervene for another person's health or safety. One of the barriers to intervention was the possible perception that the victim deserved the aggressive invasion of her privacy.

Blaming the Victim

It's not unusual to blame the victim of unfortunate circumstances. In fact, psychological research has shown that victims of crimes and vehicle crashes are often perceived as causing their fate. For example, many people believe rape victims are somewhat to blame for the rape. "If she hadn't dressed and acted that way, she would not have been sexually assaulted." In other research, battered wives were viewed by some as being responsible for their abusive husbands' behavior.

Why does this absurd attributional bias occur? Social psychologists believe such prejudice is a form of self-defense that helps people maintain their visions of life as safe, orderly, and predictable. In other words, by believing victims do things to bring on their afflictions, we feel safer. If life were unfair and random, then innocent persons like ourselves could also be victimized and injured.

Belief In a Just World

This attributional bias is referred to as the "just world hypothesis." It's the assumption that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. This is

reflected in common slogans like, “what goes around comes around” and “there’s a reason for everything.”

It’s hard to deny that bad things happen in life. Pick up any newspaper and you can read about people enduring terrible misfortunes every day. This is certainly disturbing and can cause significant distress. How do we deal with the constant reminder that tragedies not only happen, but are also relatively common? One way is to believe in a just world.

Bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people. Since most of us see ourselves as decent and basically good, bad things won’t happen to us. In the eyes of the beholder, a just world is a safe world. But this attributional defense mechanism does have some unfortunate ramifications for industrial health and safety. Let’s consider these here.

It Lowers Perception of Personal Risk

The phrase, “It won’t happen to me,” is familiar to all of us. It reflects a common and functional assumption. If people thought they’d be injured at work on a particular day, they wouldn’t go to work—right? So this belief enables us to face situations where a serious injury is possible—from the drive to and from work to numerous situations in between. As it turns out, most days this conviction is supported. An unintentional injury doesn’t happen to us. It’s the other guy who gets hurt.

This belief is obviously consistent with the just world hypothesis. But this perspective also increases risk taking. We’ve all been there. We take a chance—a calculated risk—because we think we’re safe and secure in a just world.

Perhaps our risk taking would decrease if we realized that those people who suffer injuries also believed in a just world. Before getting hurt they believed it wouldn't happen to them—only to the other guy. Now they know what it's like to be that other guy. Perhaps they now believe a “just world” implies that we should do everything possible to reduce the possibility of injury to ourselves and to others. If you believe this, spread it around.

It Sustains Fault Finding

If we believe people get what they deserve in life, then they deserve any injury they receive. It sounds horrible and we would never say something like this aloud. But let's be honest, haven't you thought this at one time or another? Have you ever tried to feel better about someone getting hurt or killed by looking for things the victim could have done to prevent the incident? Do you feel more sympathy for the passengers than the driver killed in a vehicle crash?

We feel safer when we can find blame in the victim of misfortune. Then the tragedy does not seem so tragic. “After all, if she had done this or that she wouldn't have been injured.” We feel more secure knowing we can prevent such a thing from happening to us by doing what the victim didn't do.

Recognizing that individual action can cause or prevent injury is not bad. But, the actual or potential behaviors of a victim are only part of the picture. They only represent a portion of the facts—not the fault. The analysis obviously can't stop here. And, it shouldn't start here, either. But sometimes it does, and for this we can blame our belief in a just world.

It Inhibits Interpersonal Intervention

Have you ever thought safety is personal? Does it seem more natural or comfortable to give coworkers corrective feedback about their production-related behaviors than their safety-related behavior? Why is this so often the case? Why do people's production-related activities fall within our domain of interpersonal influence, but their safety-related behaviors do not?

Answers to these questions are determined by our personal beliefs and biases. Through education, training, and intervention programs, some work cultures have, in fact, improved their safety performance dramatically by making safety as impersonal as productivity. Thus, in these work settings it's just as natural to intervene on behalf of someone's safety as it is for product quality.

But this doesn't happen overnight. It's not easy to get people actively caring for other people's safety. Not only must they know what to do, they must also feel comfortable intervening and believe it's the right thing to do. Presupposing that people get what they deserve can hinder interpersonal intervention for safety; unless people also believe it's their responsibility to help make the world just and equitable by intervening to make their life space safer. This includes removing environmental hazards and barriers to safe behavior, as well as helping others become more mindful of their behaviors that put themselves and others at risk for injury.

It Reduces Public Support for Industrial Safety

Researchers of risk perception and communication have found that the public concern following disastrous events is relatively low when the individuals involved are perceived as gaining something. For example, when benefits like increased industrial

productivity result from risky behavior and individual injury, the public perception is typically “they got what they deserved.” In these cases, it’s quite difficult to obtain public sympathy and financial support for efforts to make the situation safer.

On the other hand, when hazards and injuries seem unfair, as when a child is molested or inflicted with a deadly disease, the public pays special attention. Therefore, it’s comparably easy to obtain contributions or voluntary assistance for programs that target vulnerable populations, like physically challenged individuals or learning-disabled children.

The victims of workplace injuries are not viewed as weak and defenseless. Occupational injuries are indiscriminately distributed among employees who take risks, and they get what they deserve. This common perception manifests the just world hypothesis, and explains why public support is difficult to obtain for safety-related campaigns.

More productive lives of Americans are lost in occupational mishaps and vehicle crashes than cancer and heart attacks combined. Yet, the amount of government support for cancer and cardiovascular disease is many times greater than the amount allocated for research and interventions to prevent injuries and fatalities in the workplace and on the road. I believe the just world hypothesis is partly responsible for this unjust situation.

In Conclusion

This article defined the “just world hypothesis” and discussed its ramifications for industrial safety and health. Certain barriers to effective incident analysis and prevention intervention occur because people believe the world is just and people get

what they deserve. In particular, believing life is equitable lowers the perception of personal risk among those who also believe they are basically good—which includes most of us.

And believing everything happens for a reason and people get what they deserve contributes to victim blaming, and inhibits interpersonal intervention for safety.

Furthermore, it's likely this belief in a just world is responsible for the low financial support for governmental agencies that target occupational safety (e.g., OSHA, MSHA, and NIOSH) compared to the government subsidies for agencies that address afflictions that attack vulnerable people, provide no beneficial side effects, and are caused by unknown and seemingly uncontrollable factors (e.g., NIH, CDC).

Understanding the just world hypothesis and its implications does nothing to help the problem, at least on the surface. But suppose we can alter this belief a little in our favor. Consider that through education and interpersonal conversation we can convince people that a just world is dependent on daily, small-win interventions that make our life space safer. In other words, we can actually make the world more just if we all do our part to remove environmental hazards, suggest refinements to make equipment more “user friendly,” and help people improve their safety-related behavior. Bottom line: A just world can be an ultimate vision made possible by our own attempts to actively care for the safety and health of ourselves and others in our life space.

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