Research article

Predicting alternative strategies for preserving a belief in a just world: The case of repressive coping style

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Abstract

Researchers suggest that observers of innocent suffering will negatively evaluate the victim as a strategy for maintaining their belief in a just world. We propose an alternative class of strategies and test whether individual differences in repressive coping style predict the type of strategy people will use. In the first two studies, we exposed repressors versus nonrepressors to victims whose suffering should pose a high versus low threat to the need to believe in a just world. Repressors had a greater tendency to positively reappraise the high threat victim’s suffering. Nonrepressors had a greater tendency to negatively evaluate the high threat victim. A third study replicated the results for the high threat conditions and suggested that repressors’ positive reappraisal is not because of a tendency to minimize suffering. Our research (i) demonstrates a class of strategies for preserving the belief in a just world other than negatively evaluating the victim and (ii) is among the first to examine directly an individual difference predictor of alternative just-world preservation strategies. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

“Outpouring of help shifts mood in China”

“‘The whole world stands behind you’: UN chief delivers message of support”

“China quake...may be ‘karma’” 1

The above headlines refer to the “Sichuan earthquake,” which hit southwestern China on 12 May 2008, leaving more than 80,000 people dead or missing and millions homeless (Mackinnon, 2009). The headlines illustrate the myriad of responses to an incident of human suffering. According to just-world theory (Lerner, 1977), innocent suffering threatens people’s need to believe in a just world, and responses from helping to derision can be attempts to restore a belief in a just world in the face of contrary evidence. Despite the serious implications of how observers deal with threats to their need to believe in a just world, research has focussed on one class of response—negative evaluations of victims. Moreover, little research has directly addressed the predictors of different ways in which people might deal with these victims. For the present studies, we address these issues by examining an alternative strategy for coping with victims who presumably threaten a need to believe in a just world and by investigating whether individual differences in repressive coping style predict people’s reactions to just-world threat.

Belief in a Just World and Responses to Undeserved Suffering

Just-world theorists (e.g., Dalbert, 2001; Lerner, 1977) propose that people have a need to believe that the world is a just place in which individuals get what they deserve. The need to believe in a just world is threatened by evidence of undeserved outcomes, such as innocent suffering, prompting attempts to preserve a belief in a just world. Lerner (1980) outlined a number of strategies that people employ to preserve their belief in a just world. For example, people can help or provide reparations for the victim (e.g., financial compensation), responses that Lerner (1980) called “rational.” When such responses are impossible, too costly, or ineffective, people might resort to psychological rationalizations (Lerner & Miller, 1978). The most often studied rationalizations involve negatively evaluating the victim; most notably, blaming victims for their fate or generally derogating victims’ character by labeling them as undesirable or unworthy (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). In both cases, a belief in a just world is preserved by making victims seem more deserving of their fate.

Less attention has been given to alternative strategies for restoring a belief in a just world. For example, Lerner (1980) suggested that aside from blaming victims or derogating their character, people might reinterpret the victim’s outcome. We propose a class of alternative strategies of this nature—“positive reappraisal” or a tendency to see victims’ suffering in a positive light.

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1The quotes are from Cody (2008, p. A06), Fan and Drew (2008, p. A17), and Singh (2008), respectively.
There are at least two examples of how people put unjust suffering in a positive light. First, observers might claim that justice will occur in the long run (Maes, 1998), at some later point in the victim’s life or in an afterlife. Lerner (1980) theorized that this belief in ultimate justice is a chronic feature of adults’ belief in a just world. We propose that thoughts of ultimate justice can be situationaly induced (regardless of individuals’ chronic beliefs) when individuals are confronted with injustice.

A second way of viewing innocent suffering in a positive light is to see benefits in suffering, such as expressed in the adage “suffering builds character.” Although researchers have examined a tendency to find benefits in one’s own traumatic life events (e.g., Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), this coping mechanism has rarely been discussed with respect to injustice per se, or with respect to the unjust fate of others. Kay and Jost (2003), however, examined a similar mechanism within the context of system justification theory. They showed that disadvantaged individuals who have additional negative characteristics compared with advantaged individuals (e.g., a person who is more poor and more miserable than his richer friend) arouses observers’ concern with justice, relative to disadvantaged individuals whose situations are offset by other qualities (e.g., a poor person who is happier than his rich friend). Thus, offsetting outcomes might appease justice concerns. We further suggest that people actively appeal to offsetting outcomes to cope with the threat posed by injustice. Specifically, we examine the possibility that people will invoke benefits that are seen to accrue directly from a person’s disadvantage as a way of coping with the threat of another’s unjust suffering.

Our goal was to investigate positive reappraisal of undeserved suffering by exploring for whom this response is preferred. We define “positive reappraisal” as reactions that refer to ultimate justice or to benefits of the victim’s suffering. As noted earlier, there is little research on predictors of alternative strategies for maintaining one’s belief in a just world. Our studies are among the first to directly investigate an individual difference predictor of these varying reactions (see Hafer & Gosse, 2010). In particular, we expected that positive reappraisal of a just-world threat would be more characteristic of people who have a repressive coping style, or “repressors.” We expected other individuals, or “nonrepressors,” to respond in a manner that is consistent with the focus of experimental just-world research, that is, by negatively evaluating the victim.

Repressive Coping Style and Responses to Threat

Repressors are usually classified as such based on low scores on self-report measures of chronic anxiety and high scores on measures of defensiveness (see Weinberger, Schwartz, & Davidson, 1979). A repressive coping style can generally be characterized by an avoidance of negative affect (Derakshan, Eysenck, & Myers, 2007). For example, repressors tend to show physiological indicators of anxiety in stressful situations, whereas displaying low anxiety on self-report measures (e.g., Derakshan & Eysenck, 2001; Weinberger et al., 1979).

Findings from the repressive coping literature led us to believe that repressors might be more likely than nonrepressors to respond to victims who threaten the need to believe in a just world by seeing their situation in a positive light. First, repressors are more optimistic than nonrepressors in response to potentially threatening negative events, for example, the likelihood that they will develop serious health problems (Myers & Reynolds, 2000). Second, repressors deal with negative threatening stimuli by conjuring positive thoughts. For instance, Langens and Mörth (2003) found that in a high threat condition for which participants attempted to complete a difficult task under time pressure, repressors were more likely than nonrepressors to subsequently generate success imagery. Boden and Baumeister (1997) found that after exposure to negative emotional stimuli, repressors were quicker to recall a happy memory or were more likely to conjure positive thoughts, compared with nonrepressors.

In studies 1 and 2 reported here, we manipulated whether a victim presumably posed a high versus low threat to observers’ need to believe in a just world. Based on the findings reported in the previous paragraph, we hypothesized that repressors, more than nonrepressors, would respond to a high threat victim by seeing the victim’s suffering in a positive light. Furthermore, if repressors’ positive reappraisal is a strategy for maintaining a belief in a just world, then the predicted difference between repressors and nonrepressors should not appear in response to a low threat victim, who poses less threat to the need to believe in a just world (Hypothesis 1).

Although we thought repressors would respond to a high threat victim by viewing her suffering in a more positive light, we expected nonrepressors to respond to the high threat victim by negatively evaluating her. We had two reasons for our expectation regarding nonrepressors. First, researchers estimate that 10 to 20% of the population are repressors (e.g., Myers, 2000a); thus, the majority are nonrepressors. Perhaps the previous emphasis on negative evaluations of the victim, like blame and derogation, reflects the preferred strategy of this majority. Note, however, that repressors are a sizable minority and, therefore, are worthy of study. Second, results from Thornton (1992) suggest that negative evaluation of threatening victims is less characteristic of repressors than of nonrepressors. Thornton found that people low in repressive coping style were more likely than repressors to attribute responsibility to a victim of sexual assault. According to Thornton, these findings indicate that the oft-noted defensive attribution of responsibility is more characteristic of individuals who do not engage in repressive coping. Note that Thornton did not assess alternative coping mechanisms that might be more characteristic of repressors, as we do in our studies.

In study 2 reported here, aside from positive reappraisal, we assessed observers’ evaluation of the victim. We hypothesized that nonrepressors, more than repressors (for whom an alternative strategy is preferred), would respond to a victim who poses a strong threat to the need to believe in a just world by negatively evaluating her. Furthermore, if nonrepressors’ negative evaluations of the victim are a strategy for maintaining a belief in a just world, then this predicted difference should not occur in response to a low threat victim (Hypothesis 2).

In study 3, we attempted to replicate results from the high threat condition in study 2. We also tested whether positive reappraisal can be distinguished from a related coping mechanism.
STUDY 1

Method

Participants

Participants were 112 students at Brock University, in Ontario, Canada (98 women; mean age = 20.49, SD = 3.57). They received course credit for participation.

Procedure

The students took part in two sessions separated by approximately 4 weeks. They participated in the first session in small groups, during which they individually completed materials for several studies, including our measures for repressive coping style. Repressive copying style was assessed with a measure of trait anxiety (Taylor’s [1953] Manifest Anxiety Scale) and a measure of defensiveness (Crowne & Marlowe’s[1960] Social Desirability Scale), as per Weinerberger et al. (1979).2 Participants scoring above the median on defensiveness but below the median on anxiety were classified as repressors; the rest were classified as nonrepressors (see Myers, 2000b).3

Participants were tested individually for the second session, which they believed involved a separate investigation on “current health issues.” Participants watched the same 5-minute video (used in Hafer, 2000b, study 2), which was supposedly an excerpt of a counseling session between a therapist and a student, named Sarah, who was suffering symptoms of depression. The therapist and student were portrayed by actors.

Before the video, the experimenter explained that Sarah had been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease (STD), which led to her depression. Participants were told that Sarah had contracted the STD after a condom had broken during sexual intercourse (see Hafer, 2000b). Thus, the victim was innocent, in that she was not responsible for the disease (see Feather, 1999). Her innocence should make her potentially threatening to the need to believe in a just world.

After the video, we manipulated the degree of just-world threat by varying the severity of the victim’s suffering (see also Callan, Ellard, & Nicol, 2006, study 3; Hafer, 2000b, study 2). In the high threat or severe suffering condition, participants were told that Sarah’s emotional condition had worsened since the counseling session because government cutbacks meant counseling was no longer available to her. In the low threat or moderate suffering condition, participants were told that Sarah’s emotional suffering had improved.

Following the manipulation, participants completed a questionnaire containing the dependent measures. As a check on the manipulation of victim suffering (severe versus moderate), we asked participants how likely they thought it was that Sarah would continue to suffer (1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely). To measure positive reappraisal, we averaged ratings for three items (α = .71): “How likely do you think it is that, in the future, Sarah will get what she wants out of life?”, “How likely do you think it is that Sarah’s situation will make her a better person?”, and “To what extent do you think Sarah will learn something useful from her experience?” (1 = not at all to 7 = very much).

Results and Discussion

A Repressive Coping Style (repressor versus nonrepressor) X Victim Suffering (severe versus moderate) Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on the manipulation check showed that our manipulation was effective. Participants rated Sarah’s suffering as more likely to continue in the severe (M = 4.92, SE = 0.19) than in the moderate suffering condition (M = 4.06, SE = 0.19), F(1, 107) = 10.30, p = .002, partial η² = .09. No other effects were significant.

To test Hypothesis 1, we conducted a Repressive Coping Style X Victim Suffering ANOVA on the measure of positive reappraisal. The analysis yielded only a significant interaction, F(1, 107) = 5.39, p = .02, partial η² = .05. Consistent with our hypothesis, when the victim’s suffering was severe, repressors saw her suffering in a more positive light than did nonrepressors, F(1, 108) = 5.91, p = .02, partial η² = .05; however, when the victim’s suffering was moderate, repressors saw her suffering in just as positive a light as did nonrepressors, F(1, 108) = .78, ns (see Table 1). In addition, nonrepressors saw the victim’s suffering in a less positive light if the suffering was severe than if it was moderate, F(1, 108) = 14.36, p < .001, partial η² = .12. Repressors in the two victim groups, however, did not differ in their response to the victim’s suffering, F(1, 108) = .05, ns.

Note that logically, observers should see the situation of the victim whose suffering was severe in a less positive light than that of the victim whose suffering was moderate. Nonrepressors responded in this manner. Repressors, however, saw both victims’ situations as equally positive (and they gave more positive appraisals in the severe suffering condition than did nonrepressors). We interpret the apparent irrationality of repressors as reflecting a defensive response to the high threat victim, which led repressors to see severe suffering in just as positive a light as moderate suffering.

In summary, repressive coping style moderated how people responded to a victim who posed a strong threat to the need to believe in a just world. As predicted, repressors saw the high threat victim’s suffering in a more positive light than did nonrepressors. If one believes that innocent suffering brings benefits or that the victim will ultimately reap positive outcomes, one can maintain a belief that the world is a just place in which people get what they deserve.

Table 1. Positive reappraisal as a function of victim suffering (just-world threat) and repressive coping style, study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Repressor</th>
<th>Nonrepressor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moderate suffering</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low threat</td>
<td>4.96 (.25)</td>
<td>5.23 (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe suffering</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low threat</td>
<td>5.04 (.24)</td>
<td>4.33 (.17)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Higher scores indicate a greater tendency to view the suffering in a positive light (possible scores range from 1 to 7). Standard errors are in parentheses. For the repressor-severe suffering group, n = 19. For the repressor-moderate suffering group, n = 17. For the remaining two groups, n = 38.
Our results raise the question, how did nonrepressors maintain their belief in a just world in the face of severe innocent suffering? The primary purpose of study 2 was to test whether repressors would deal with threats to their need to believe in a just world by seeing the victim’s suffering in a positive light (Hypothesis 1), whereas nonrepressors, in contrast, would use strategies involving negative evaluations of the victim (Hypothesis 2).

**STUDY 2**

**Pretest**

We conducted a pretest to assess the validity of the manipulation of just-world threat used in study 2. Specifically, we investigated whether justice concerns were more salient to observers in the high threat versus low threat condition.

Participants were 87 students (80 women; mean age = 19.87, SD = 3.37) at Brock University. They first viewed a 7-minute videotaped interview with a young woman named “Kerry” (see Hafer, Bégue, Choma, & Dempsey, 2005), a real victim of HIV/AIDS. Before the video, we manipulated threat to the need to believe in a just world by varying victim innocence (see Hafer et al., 2005). In the high threat or innocent victim condition, participants were told that Kerry contracted the disease after a condom had broken during sexual intercourse, as in study 1. In the low threat or noninnocent victim condition, participants were told that Kerry had contracted the disease after not using a condom during intercourse. The innocent victim should pose a greater threat to the need to believe in a just world because she is less responsible for her fate; thus, her suffering seems more undeserved (see Feather, 1999).

After the video, we assessed the salience of justice concerns with an emotional Stroop task. In these tasks, participants are shown threat-related words and control words that are presented in different colors. Participants are asked to identify the color of each word display as quickly and accurately as possible.

Research shows that people respond more slowly when identifying the color of threat-related versus control stimuli; that is, they show “interference” for threat-related stimuli (Williams, Mathews, & MacLeod, 1996), including threat to the need to believe in a just world (e.g., Aguiar, Vala, & Correia, 2008; Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2007, study 1; Hafer, 2000a). For example, for a manipulation similar to that used in our study 1, Callan et al. (2006, study 3) found that participants showed interference for justice words after exposure to a victim who presumably posed a strong threat to the need to believe in a just world, but not after exposure to a victim who posed a weak threat. If the manipulation of just-world threat in our study 2 is valid, then participants should similarly show greater interference for justice words (evidence that justice concerns were salient) in the high versus low threat condition.

For our Stroop task, participants were presented with 10 justice words (e.g., justice, equality) and 10 words from each of two sets of control words: social harm words (e.g., failure, doubtful) and neutral words (e.g., subjects, athlete). Each word was shown twice in a randomly selected color from the set blue, green, yellow, and red. The words were also selected at random. The words were matched across category for length and frequency (see Carroll, Davies, & Richman, 1971). Each trial began with a 1-second delay, followed by a fixation cross in the center of the screen for 800 milliseconds. The word then appeared and was subsequently masked by a row of “X’s” (in the same color as the word) after 30 milliseconds. The mask stayed on the screen until the participant indicated the color of the word-mask display by pressing the appropriately colored key on the computer keyboard. The next trial then began. Stimuli were presented and reaction times were recorded (in milliseconds) by E-prime, Version 1.0 (Schneider, Eschmann, & Zuccolotto, 2002).

Responses that were more than three standard deviations from a participant’s mean and incorrect responses were removed. We then created a justice-neutral interference score by subtracting the average color-identification latency for neutral words from the average color-identification latency for justice words. We also created a justice-harm interference score by subtracting the average color-identification latency for social harm words from the average latency for justice words. Using the social harm words as the control allowed us to test whether justice words demanded more attentional resources compared with words that were also from a single category and emotionally laden (as are justice words).

After the Stroop task, participants completed a number of questionnaires for unrelated investigations, including the scales used to assess repressive coping style in study 1. We realized that if hypotheses were supported for study 2, our interpretation would be strengthened by evidence that justice was a more salient concern (i.e., justice-word interference was greater) in the high threat versus low threat condition for both repressors and nonrepressors. Such evidence would increase our confidence that responses by repressors versus nonrepressors, though different, both reflect strategies for coping with the injustice of the high threat victim’s suffering.

A Repressive Coping Style X Victim Innocence ANOVA on the justice-neutral interference scores yielded a significant main effect for victim innocence such that, as expected, interference for justice words was greater when the victim was innocent (M = 12.51, SE = 10.52) than when she was not innocent (M = 11.65, SE = 10.87), F(1, 83) = 4.79, p = .03, partial η² = .06. There was no significant interaction, F(1, 83) = .49, ns. An ANOVA on the justice-harm interference scores yielded similar results: a main effect for victim innocence (innocent, M = 19.76, SE = 10.86; noninnocent, M = 10.48, SE = 11.21), F(1, 83) = 4.11, p = .046, partial η² = 0.05, with no significant interaction, F(1, 83) = .10, ns. As shown in Table 2, repressors and nonrepressors showed a pattern of reaction times for both interference scores that was consistent with justice-word interference in the innocent victim but not in the noninnocent victim condition (see also Aguiar et al., 2008; Correia et al., 2007, study 1; Hafer, 2000a). These findings increased our

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4 We did not transform interference scores because they were approximately normally distributed (Shapiro–Wilk’s statistic = .99 and .98, respectively, p > .30).

5 Separate Repressive Coping Style X Victim Innocence Analysis of Variances (ANOVAs) for the justice, neutral, and social harm words yielded a main effect of victim innocence for justice words, F(1, 83) = 5.65, p = .02, partial η² = 0.06, but not for neutral words or social harm words. Thus, the effect of victim innocence appears to be a function of slower color-identification latencies for justice words in the innocent versus noninnocent condition, rather than differences in reaction times for control words.
confidence that the high threat victim would raise the salience of justice concerns in study 2 and that our manipulation would be effective in this manner regardless of repressive coping style.6

Method

Participants

Participants were 85 students from Brock University (78 women, mean age = 19.87, SD = 3.87). They received course credit for their help.

Procedure

The procedure was similar to that of study 1; thus, we will focus on the differences. Participants received the manipulation of threat to the need to believe in a just world (innocent versus noninnocent victim information) and the video from the pretest.

After the video, participants were given 5 minutes to write down any thoughts they had about Kerry and her situation. Responses were coded by two independent raters who were blind to the experimental condition and participants’ categorization as a repressor or nonrepressor. The raters coded participants’ responses with respect to two categories, “positive reappraisal” and “negative evaluations.” For the positive reappraisal category, responses were coded as “1” if they included either of the following: (i) benefits to the suffering and (ii) suggestions that in the long run, the victim’s suffering would subside or she would reap positive outcomes. Otherwise, responses were assigned a “0” for this category. For the negative evaluation category, responses were coded as a “1” if they included any of the following: (i) blaming the victim for her fate, (ii) evaluating her character negatively, and (iii) distancing from the victim by noting dissimilarities between the victim and the self (see Hafer, 2000b, studies 1 and 2; Hafer, 2000a, study 2). Otherwise, responses were coded as “0” for the negative evaluation category. The raters agreed on 88% of classifications. Our analyses used the data from the rater who had more experience with coding open-ended responses.

The open-ended task was followed by several rating scales. A composite measure of positive reappraisal was the average of participants’ responses to three items: how likely they thought it was that the victim would become a better person, that the victim would learn from her experience, as in study 1, and that Kerry’s situation would benefit her in the future (1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely). We measured the tendency to negatively evaluate the victim by averaging responses to two items (reverse scored): “How much do you think you would like Kerry as a person?” (1 = not at all, 7 = very much) and “Overall, how positive/negative is your impression of Kerry as a person?” (1 = very negative, 7 = very positive). Reliabilities and intercorrelations for the primary dependent variables are in Table 3.

There were also two manipulation checks. First, a measure of blame/responsibility was the average of four items (α = .81), which asked the extent to which participants thought the victim’s character or behavior was to blame or was responsible for the fact that she contracted HIV (1 = not at all to blame/responsible, 7 = entirely to blame/total responsibility). Second, immediately prior to debriefing, participants were to recall how Kerry had contracted the disease. These responses were coded as “correct” or “incorrect.”

Results

Manipulation Checks

Only two participants did not correctly report how the victim had contracted the disease (data from these participants were retained). These two participants merely stated that the disease was contracted “during sex.”

Table 3. Alpha and intercorrelations for primary dependent variables in study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Alpha</th>
<th>Negative-C</th>
<th>Positive-O</th>
<th>Negative-O</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive reappraisal composite</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative evaluation composite</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
<td>.41***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive reappraisal open ended</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.25*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Negative-C = negative evaluation composite; Positive-O = positive reappraisal open ended; Negative-O = negative evaluation open ended. Higher scores indicate greater degrees of the construct. N = 85, or 84 for correlations involving open-ended measures.

6The relation between repressive coping style and performance on emotional Stroop tasks is inconsistent (cf., Brosschot, de Ruiter, & Kindt, 1999; Dawkins & Furnham, 1989; Fox, 1994; Newman & McKinney, 2002), suggesting the presence of moderator variables. The vigilance-avoidance theory of Derakshan et al. (2007) suggests that repressors are less likely to show avoidance (manifested as a lack of interference) compared with other groups when the threat-related stimuli are processed and responded to automatically, such as with subliminal presentations like those in the present pretest. We find it interesting that the only other studies we know of that examine repressors’ responses to subliminally presented stimuli in an emotional Stroop task (i.e., Jansson & Lundh, 2006; Jansson, Lundh, & Oldenburg, 2005) also found no evidence that repressors showed less interference compared with other groups. These null findings should be supplemented by further research.

Note: Interference scores are in milliseconds. Higher (and positive) scores indicate greater interference. Standard errors are in parentheses, after the means.
A Repressive Coping Style X Victim Innocence ANOVA on the composite measure of victim blame yielded only a significant interaction, $F(1, 81) = 6.68$, $p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$ (see Table 4). Consistent with our prediction, when the victim was innocent, repressors saw her suffering in a more positive light compared with nonrepressors, $F(1, 81) = 8.37$, $p = .005$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$; however, when the victim was not innocent, repressors saw her suffering in just as positive a light as did nonrepressors, $F(1, 81) = .52$, $ns$. In addition, repressors saw the victim’s suffering in a more positive light when she was innocent than when she was not innocent, $F(1, 81) = 6.69$, $p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$; whereas nonrepressors saw the victim’s suffering in an equally positive light, regardless of her innocence, $F(1, 81) = .47$, $ns$.

A Repressive Coping Style X Victim Innocence ANOVA on the open-ended measure of positive reappraisal resulted in only a significant interaction, $F(1, 80) = 4.20$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$ (see Table 4). When the victim was innocent, repressors were marginally more likely to put her suffering in a positive light compared with nonrepressors, $F(1, 80) = 3.66$, $p = .06$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$; when the victim was not innocent, repressors were just as likely to put her suffering in a positive light as were nonrepressors, $F(1, 80) = .93$, $ns$. The means within repressive coping style groups showed the same pattern as for the composite measure of positive reappraisal, though the differences were nonsignificant.

**Hypothesis 1**

**Hypothesis 2**

A Repressive Coping Style X Victim Innocence ANOVA on the composite measure of negative evaluation resulted in a significant effect for victim innocence, $F(1, 81) = 4.35$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. The innocent victim was evaluated less negatively ($M = 2.19$, $SE = .19$) than was the noninnocent victim ($M = 2.73$, $SE = .18$). This effect was superseded by a significant interaction (see Table 4), $F(1, 81) = 4.36$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. As predicted, when the victim was innocent, nonrepressors gave a more negative evaluation of her than did repressors, $F(1, 81) = 7.12$, $p = .009$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$; when the victim was not innocent, nonrepressors and repressors did not differ in their evaluations, $F(1, 81) = .06$, $ns$. In addition, nonrepressors evaluated the victim just as negatively when she was innocent as when she was not innocent, $F(1, 81) = .01$, $ns$; whereas repressors evaluated the victim more negatively when she was not innocent than when she was innocent, $F(1, 81) = 5.78$, $p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$.

An ANOVA on the open-ended measure of negative evaluation led to only a significant interaction, $F(1, 80) = 4.27$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$ (see Table 4). Consistent with our hypothesis, when the victim was innocent, nonrepressors were more likely to negatively evaluate her than were repressors, $F(1, 80) = 6.91$, $p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$; when the victim was not innocent, nonrepressors and repressors were equally likely to offer a negative evaluation of the victim, $F(1, 80) = .06$, $ns$. Comparing the means within repressive coping style group, nonrepressors were just as likely to evaluate the victim negatively when she was innocent as when she was not innocent, $F(1, 80) = .22$, $ns$; whereas repressors were more likely to negatively evaluate the victim when she was not innocent than when she was innocent, $F(1, 80) = 4.48$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$.

**Discussion**

The results of study 2 support both of our hypotheses. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, when exposed to a victim who presumably threatened the need to believe in a just world, repressors saw her suffering in a more positive light than did nonrepressors. Repressors and nonrepressors did not differ in their appraisal of the victim’s suffering when she posed little threat to the need to believe in a just world in the first place. Our results replicated the basic pattern from study 1, despite the fact that we used a different manipulation of just-world threat (innocent versus noninnocent victim).

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**Table 4. Reactions to the victim as a function of victim innocence (just-world threat) and repressive coping style, study 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Repressor</th>
<th>Nonrepressor</th>
<th>Repressor</th>
<th>Nonrepressor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive reappraisal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composite</td>
<td>5.57 (0.33)</td>
<td>4.48 (0.18)</td>
<td>4.39 (0.31)</td>
<td>4.66 (0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open ended</td>
<td>0.70 (0.16)</td>
<td>0.36 (0.09)</td>
<td>0.36 (0.15)</td>
<td>0.53 (0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composite</td>
<td>1.70 (0.32)</td>
<td>2.69 (0.18)</td>
<td>2.77 (0.31)</td>
<td>2.68 (0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open ended</td>
<td>0.30 (0.15)</td>
<td>0.74 (0.08)</td>
<td>0.73 (0.14)</td>
<td>0.69 (0.08)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Open ended = dichotomous open-ended measures, coded as 0 or 1. The scales for the composite dependent variables range from 1 to 7. Higher scores indicate greater degrees of the construct. Standard errors are in parentheses. For the repressor-innocent victim group, $n = 10$. For the repressor-noninnocent victim group, $n = 11$. For the nonrepressor-innocent victim group, $n = 32$, except for the two open-ended dependent variables, where $n = 31$. For the nonrepressor-noninnocent victim group, $n = 32$. 

Note that the suffering itself was described identically in both conditions; thus, there is little obvious reason to see the innocent victim’s suffering in a more positive light than the noninnocent victim’s suffering. Indeed, nonrepressors did not differentially appraise the victims’ suffering. Repressors, however, saw the innocent victim’s suffering in a more positive light than the noninnocent victim’s suffering (and they gave more positive appraisals in the innocent suffering condition than did nonrepressors). Our interpretation of the positive reappraisal data, then, is the same as for study 1, although the pattern of means is different because of the varying manipulations of just-world threat. In study 1, repressors were less rational in their appraisals of the victims’ suffering such that they saw the situation of the severely and moderately suffering victim as equally positive, whereas nonrepressors logically differentiated between the victims’ situations. In study 2, repressors were less rational in their appraisals such that they saw the suffering of the innocent victim in a more positive light than the noninnocent victim, whereas nonrepressors logically did not differentiate between the victims’ suffering.

Hypothesis 2 was also supported. Nonrepressors evaluated the innocent victim’s character more negatively than did repressors, which presumably makes the suffering seem less undeserved and less unjust. We found no difference between repressive coping style groups when the victim posed less threat to the need to believe in a just world.

Our data suggest that although repressors responded less rationally with respect to appraisal of the victims’ suffering, nonrepressors responded less rationally with respect to negative evaluation of the victims. Logically, observers should evaluate the noninnocent victim more negatively than the innocent victim, because the former behaved irresponsibly. Repressors showed this rational response. Nonrepressors, however, did not differentially evaluate the victims (and they gave more negative evaluations in the innocent suffering condition than did repressors). This apparent irrationality presumably reflects defensive responding on the part of nonrepressors, which led them to evaluate the innocent victim just as negatively as they evaluated the victim who behaved badly.

We found similar patterns for open-ended measures of positive reappraisal of the suffering and negative evaluations of the victim. Presumably the open-ended question, which was administered before the rating scales, assessed spontaneous responses that were unadulterated by the researchers’ preconceived notions about observers’ reactions. Thus, results for the open-ended data increase our confidence in the validity of the results for the more standard measures.

Although our data supported our hypothesis regarding positive reappraisal, repressors might see a high threat victim in a more positive light because they minimize the distress experienced by the victim in the first place. If so, what we claim is “positive reappraisal” cannot be distinguished from a minimization strategy for coping with threats to the need to believe in a just world. We argue that repressors see the victim’s suffering as equally painful as do nonrepressors, but they view that painful suffering in a more positive light. This claim is tested in study 3. In study 3, we also attempted to replicate reactions to the high threat victim from study 2.

STUDY 3

Method

Participants

Sixty-four students (56 women, mean age = 20.38, SD = 4.93) from Brock University participated in the study. They received course credit for their help.

Procedure

The general procedure followed that of the innocent victim condition in study 2, except the measure of repressive coping style was administered at the end of the experimental session. The measure of positive reappraisal (α = .69) was participants’ average rating on all four items that were used in studies 1 and 2 to measure this construct, as well as the item, “How likely do you think it is that a cure will be found for Kerry?” (1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely).7 The measure of negative evaluation was identical to study 2 (α = .82). The measure of minimization was the average of participants’ ratings for the following questions (α = .60): “How emotionally painful do you think this experience has been for Kerry?”, “How harmful an effect do you think Kerry’s experience has had on her social and emotional functioning?”, and “How serious (in terms of negative outcomes) would you say Kerry’s situation is?” (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely). Items were recorded so that high scores indicated greater minimization.

Results and Discussion

Minimization was moderately correlated with both positive reappraisal, r = .31, p = .01, and with negative evaluation, r = .33, p = .007. For positive reappraisal and negative evaluation, r = -.26, p = .04.

An independent sample t-test with Repressive Coping Style as the grouping variable (21 repressors versus 43 nonrepressors) showed that repressors saw the innocent victim’s suffering in a more positive light (M = 4.77, SE = 0.17) compared with nonrepressors (M = 3.91, SE = 0.16), t(62) = 3.27, p = .002, d = 0.89. This finding is consistent with Hypothesis 1 and is similar to results from the innocent victim condition in study 2.

Also, similar to the innocent victim condition in study 2, and consistent with Hypothesis 2, nonrepressors evaluated the innocent victim’s character more negatively (M = 2.79, SE = 0.16) than did repressors (M = 2.07, SE = 0.20), t(62) = 2.66, p = .01, d = 0.72. Thus, we conceptually replicated the findings from the high threat victim conditions of studies 1 and 2.

There was no significant difference between repressors and nonrepressors for the minimization variable, t(62) = .74, ns (overall M = 1.51). In addition, when minimization was used as a covariate, the difference between repressors and nonrepressors

7In Study 2, we also assessed the perceived likelihood that the victim’s illness would be cured. Unlike Study 3, however, this item reduced rather than increased the reliability of the composite measure of positive reappraisal; thus, we did not include it in our final composite. A Repressive Coping Style X Victim Innocence ANOVA with the “cure” item as the dependent variable, however, yielded a significant interaction, F(1, 81) = 4.33, p = .04, partial η² = .05, with the identical pattern of mean differences as the composite measure of positive reappraisal.
for positive appraisal remained significant, $F(1, 61)=9.98, p = .002$, partial $\eta^2 = .14$. Thus, positive reappraisal could not have reflected a tendency for repressors to minimize the victim’s suffering in the first place compared with nonrepressors. Finally, the difference between repressors and nonrepressors for negative evaluation of the victim’s character also remained significant when minimization was used as a covariate, $F(1, 61)=9.95, p = .002$, partial $\eta^2 = .14$.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

We investigated a class of strategies for preserving the belief in a just world in the face of an innocent victim, other than negative evaluations of the victim. Furthermore, we examined whether individual differences in repressive coping style predict the strategy that people will use. In three studies, we showed that repressors were more likely than nonrepressors to respond to a victim who posed a strong just-world threat by seeing the victim’s suffering in a positive light, for example, by believing that the victim benefitted from suffering or would reap rewards in the future. This finding occurred whether we operationalized threat to the need to believe in a just world in terms of the severity of suffering or the innocence of the victim. Furthermore, repressors’ positive reappraisal did not appear to reflect minimization of the victim’s suffering (study 3). In comparison with repressors, in studies 2 and 3, we found that nonrepressors responded to a high threat victim in a manner that has been the usual focus of experimental research on belief in a just world. Specifically, nonrepressors evaluated the high threat victim more negatively than did repressors (e.g., they generally derogated her character). The differential reactions between repressors and nonrepressors did not occur for victims who presumably posed less threat to the need to believe in a just world. Thus, the differences between repressors and nonrepressors did not reflect variations in general responding but appeared to be different methods of preserving a belief that the world is a just place.

**Implications for Research on the Need to Believe in a Just World**

Our findings add to the literature on the need to believe in a just world in a number of ways. As we noted in the introduction, research has rarely addressed the question of when and for whom different just-world preservation strategies will be preferred. The current research begins to fill this gap. Just as a similar issue with predicting dissonance-reduction strategies helped further refine theories of cognitive dissonance (see Olson & Stone, 2005), so we hope our efforts will help refine just-world theory.

Individual difference and situational predictors of different ways of responding to just-world threat can help account for inconsistencies in research on the need to believe in a just world. For example, although defensive forms of victim blame and character evaluation have received a great deal of attention in the just-world literature, results often do not support hypotheses (see Hafer & Bègue, 2005). Among other problems, participants in these experiments might be choosing several different ways of coping with unjust suffering, some of which are not assessed by the researchers. A better understanding of the predictors of different just-world preservation strategies might lead to more consistent findings.

The present studies also add to the experimental just-world literature by extending research beyond victim blame and derogation (see Callan & Ellard, 2010). Although Lerner (1980) proposed a number of mechanisms for coping with threatening instances of injustice, many of these have yet to receive much empirical study. Viewing innocent, severe suffering in a positive light is one example.

**Implications for Research on Repressive Coping Style**

Our studies also add to the literature on repressive coping style. First, our data give further evidence that repressors sometimes conjure positive thoughts to cope with negative emotional stimuli. Repressors in Boden and Baumeister (1997) and in Langens and Mörtl (2003) generated positive thoughts that were not directly related to the threatening stimuli, presumably to distract themselves from the threatening event. Our data suggest that repressors might also cope with threat by conjuring positive thoughts about the threatening stimulus itself.

Second, we presented participants with a different kind of threat than is typical in the repressive coping style literature. Researchers have suggested that repressors’ coping mechanisms are activated primarily by self-concept threats; thus, most of the threatening stimuli in the repressive coping literature are of this sort (Derakshan et al., 2007). Our data suggest that threats to basic world assumptions might also engage repressors’ particular strategies for coping and that such engagement can occur even when the threat emanates from another person’s plight rather than one’s own (see also Boden & Baumeister, 1997; Krabé, 1999). Although the high threat victims in our research do not constitute direct threats to the self-concept, they are still “self-relevant” to the extent that the victim inhabits the same world as the observer, and thus, the victim’s suffering has relevance for the observer’s own chances of obtaining just deserts (Lerner, 1977). As Derakshan et al. (2007) state, more work is needed to identify the threats of most concern to individuals with a repressive coping style.

**Limitations and Future Research**

There are several limitations to our studies to be addressed in future research. First, although our method for classifying
individuals with respect to repressive coping style is common, other methods might lead to more nuanced conclusions. For example, the nonrepressor groups in our studies are relatively heterogeneous with respect to defensiveness and anxiety; thus, certain subgroups might be identified who do not respond like the “average” nonrepressor. In future, people from most or all of the four groups that result from crossing high versus low levels of defensiveness and anxiety could be selected from a large screening sample for inclusion in later experiments. This methodology would help ensure that groups are not limited to repressors versus nonrepressors (and that cell sizes are equally large for all groups).

A second limitation is that our experimental situation constrained the number of possible mechanisms for maintaining a belief in a just world. According to just-world theory, observers resort to cognitive rationalizations when they cannot help or compensate the victim (e.g., Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Cognitive rationalizations are probably also more likely when observers cannot avoid the victim’s situation. In the present studies, participants could not directly help or easily avoid the victim. Thus, participants were forced to employ a strategy that involved cognitive restructuring (either by thinking of positive aspects of the suffering or negative aspects of the victim). Langens and Mört (2003) reasoned that repressors will be more likely to engage in attentional avoidance in the presence of low intensity threats: In the presence of high intensity threats, when the threat is difficult to avoid, repressors will cope by conjuring positive thoughts. Langens and Mört (2003) found partial support for their hypotheses. Future research should examine differing situational constraints to assess when repressors versus nonrepressors will engage in various strategies for coping with threat, including threats to the need to believe in a just world.

Third, the majority of our participants were women. We wanted a high degree of identification between participants and the female victim, given that identification influences responses to victims’ suffering (e.g., Correa et al., 2007; Novak & Lerner, 1968). We expected that identification would be greater for women; thus, we did not attempt to recruit more male participants. In the future, researchers could investigate how identification moderates our findings.

Researchers could also investigate other coping styles in the context of threats to the need to believe in a just world, such as those assessed by well-known coping inventories (e.g., Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Other kinds of individual differences that might predict preferences for various just-world preservation strategies—perhaps mediated by coping styles—are demographics, ideological beliefs, and personality traits (see Hafer & Gosse, 2010). Situational predictors are also important to study, as well as situation-by-person interactions.

Finally, researchers could examine the consequences of various ways of responding to just-world threats. For example, are observers who positively reappraise innocent suffering more or less motivated to help victims recover from their trauma? One possibility is that viewing suffering in a positive light renders a situation less emotionally overwhelming, although still allowing people to acknowledge perceived injustice. The end result might be a stronger motivation to approach victims who would otherwise be treated as pariahs as a result of defensive blame and derogation processes. Alternatively, if one perceives that victims receive benefits from suffering or that their situation will be fair in the long run, then one might come to believe that victims do not need help. These potential consequences increase the importance of future research on who will respond in what ways to the threat of injustice and when they will do so. As the headlines at the beginning of this article suggest, responses to the same victimization event can vary widely. Whether victims are lauded, commiserated with, helped, ignored, or devalued is not just of theoretical interest to researchers but also matters greatly to the victims. We believe the research in this article is one important step in increasing our understanding of these varying responses.

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