Traumatic Events and Generational Differences in Assumptions About a Just World

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INDIVIDUALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE WORLD as benevolent, trustworthy, and just influence their reactions to the events that befall them and others (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Lerner, 1977). Variables found to affect such beliefs include ethnicity (Calhoun & Cann, 1994) and nationality (Furnham, 1993), with gender having a weak effect (Furnham, 1985, 1993; Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Smith & Green, 1984). The relationship of age to these beliefs has been examined infrequently, possibly as a result, in part, of the heavy reliance on college students as research participants (Calhoun & Cann, 1994; Furnham, 1993). The available data suggest that older Americans tend to be more likely to believe the world is just (Forest, 1995), but general cross-sectional investigations may not offer sufficient control for the impact of differences in cultural milieu (Furnham, 1993).

The occurrence of events such as the experience of an assault or the loss of a loved one can reduce the individual's belief in the world as just or benevolent (Forest, 1995; Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991). An unanswered question concerns the degree to which reported age differences in beliefs about benevolence and justice occur when control is exercised on the influence of variations in cultural contexts and on the experience of stressful life events.

Participants in our study were 223 American adults, 76 men and 147 women. Sixty-seven percent were single, 28% were married, and the remaining 10% were divorced or widowed. Seventy percent were Protestants, 13% were Catholic, 8% reported they had no religious affiliation, and the remaining participants report-
ed several different affiliations. Seventy-four percent were White, 21% were Black, 1% Hispanic, and the remaining 4% were of other ethnic groups.

Individuals were placed into one of three generational groups on the basis of their age. People under 25 were the youngest group, those between ages 25 and 55 were the middle group, and 59 and older were the oldest generational group (there were no participants between 56 and 58 years).

The World Assumptions Scale (WAS; Janoff-Bulman, 1989) and the Just World Scale (JWS; Rubin & Peplau, 1973) measure world beliefs, and the Traumatic Stress Schedule (Norris, 1990) assesses the personal experience of highly negative events. The first contact with potential participants was made through the “subject pool” of a large university in the southeastern United States. Participants were asked to fill out the packet of inventories (in randomized sequence) and to provide the names and addresses of their parents and grandparents.

Fifty-two percent of the students provided at least one address. These addresses were then used to contact parents and grandparents in a procedure similar to that used by Gordon, Range, and Edwards (1987). A cover letter accompanying the instruments asked the parent or grandparent to complete the packet of inventories about their views of the world and their experience with stressful events. One hundred packets of inventories were mailed, and 56 packets were returned.

Scores on the eight subscales of the WAS and the two of the JWS were analyzed in 2 × 3 (Gender × Generational Group) analyses of variance. There was only one significant main effect for gender. On the WAS Randomness subscale, women (M = 15.0, SD = 3.8) believed that events were less random than men (M = 13.7, SD = 4.1), F(1, 211) = 4.05, p < .05.

The generational main effect was significant for 5 of the 10 subscales, and the world view that emerged was consistent across these differences. The youngest group tended to view the world as less just and less benevolent, and the oldest group tended to view the world as luckier and more controllable. On the justice items of the JWS, F(2, 202) = 3.26, p < .05, the youngest generation (M = 36.9, SD = 7.2) saw the world as less just than did the oldest generation (M = 32.2, SD = 8.3). On the Benevolence of People subscale, F(2, 215) = 12.23, p < .01, the youngest group rated people as less benevolent (M = 9.5, SD = 3.2) than did either the middle (M = 9.5, SD = 3.2) or the oldest group (M = 8.8, SD = 3.3). On the luck items, F(2, 214) = 3.96, p < .05, the oldest group (M = 9.6, SD = 4.0) believed they were luckier than did the youngest group (M = 12.0, SD = 4.4) or the middle group (M = 12.4, SD = 3.9).

To assess the possible influence of critical life events on assumptions about the world, we repeated the Gender × Generation analyses using the total stress score (calculated by adding the stressfulness rating of each item the individual experienced) as a covariate, thus removing its effect. The only change that occurred with the covariance analyses was an additional main effect for generation on the WAS Randomness of Events subscale. The youngest participants saw
the world as more random ($M = 13.4, SD = 4.0$) than did the middle-aged ($M = 14.9, SD = 3.1$) or the oldest group ($M = 14.7, SD = 4.7$), $F(2, 210) = 3.04, p < .05$. All other significant and nonsignificant effects remained as they had been without the covariate.

The lack of significant statistical impact of the stressfulness of critical life events on generational differences in assumptive worlds suggests that such foundational assumptions as the perception of the benevolence and justice of the world are not always influenced by traumatic events (Overcash, Calhoun, Cann, & Tedeschi, 1996).

REFERENCES


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