



## A cross-cultural comparison of Turkish and Kyrgyz students' belief in a just world

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to compare Turkish and Kyrgyz students on their just world beliefs. One hundred and four Turkish and one hundred twenty Kyrgyz undergraduates participated in the study. The data was collected using the 13-item Just World Beliefs Scales by Dalbert (1999). To examine the differences a 2 (country) x 2 (sex) multivariate factorial analysis of variance was carried out. The results revealed that there were significant gender and country differences between the Turkish and Kyrgyz students' general just world beliefs and personal just world beliefs. Also, the results showed that male students had a stronger just world beliefs than the female students and the Kyrgyz students had higher scores in the just world beliefs in comparison to the Turkish students.

**Keywords:** Just world beliefs; Turkish students; Kyrgyz students; gender; cross-cultural

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The research interest in just world beliefs has continued for several decades after its first introduction by Lerner (1965). According to Lerner's (1980) just world hypothesis people are motivated to believe that the world is a just place where good people are rewarded and bad people are punished; people get what they deserve. Lerner considered the belief in a just world as a fundamental delusion. It is fundamental because it is necessary for security and mental health and it is delusion because it is not true but it is defended motivationally. Belief in a just world leads people to perceive their physical and social environment as stable and orderly. People think that the world is just, therefore, they will get what they deserve and they won't be the innocent victims of unforeseen events. When confronted with injustice they feel distress and try to eliminate these uncomfortable feelings by derogating victims, changing their perceptions, or helping innocent victims.

There are two competing thesis as to the roots of the just world beliefs (JWB). Some studies have demonstrated that one of the most important factors that determine JWB is experiencing unfair treatments and being in a disadvantaged group of a society. There are cross-cultural or single country studies supporting this view. For example, Smith and Green (1984) found that individuals with a black background and low socio-economic status had lower levels of JWB in comparison to the white and high socio-economic status individuals. Similarly, in a study carried out in Northern

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Ireland, Catholics, who were considered as disadvantaged, had lower scores of JWB than Protestants (Glennon, Joseph, & Hunter, 1993).

A number of cross cultural studies have shown cultural differences in just world beliefs in relation to some social and economic indices. For example, Furnham (1991) compared 12 countries in term of power distance and gross domestic product (GDP). He was able to show the differences between unjust world scores and a country's gross domestic product. According to the findings of this study, the lower the unjust world scores were, the higher a country's gross domestic product was, and also, individuals who have little or no power and wealth hold unjust world beliefs.

On the other hand, more recent studies considered just world beliefs as a coping strategy protecting individuals from the adverse effects of stress caused by being disadvantaged, (e.g., poverty, inequality, and discrimination). In accordance with this thesis, Umberson (1993) demonstrated that individuals from a low socio-economic status and African Americans scored higher in JWB than individuals from a high socio-economic status and Whites. Umberson claimed that rejecting unfairness could be a way of coping with unfairness itself and having a low socio-economic status. In a recent meta-analysis, Malahy, Rubinct, and Kaiser (2009) examined 6,120 American college students' scores on JWB across the last three and a half decades. They found that as income disparity increased in the society over time, so too did JWB. They concluded that their findings were further evidence of the relationship between just world beliefs and threats to justice which was pronounced previously by some other researchers (e.g., Hein, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006).

In addition, there are some studies that support neither of the abovementioned views completely, instead some of their findings provided support for the first argument and some others provided support for the second argument. For example, Hunt (2000) carried out a study with Californians comparing race and ethnic background, gender, socio-economic status, and religious affiliation on JWB. He found that the lower socio-economic status individuals had higher levels of just world beliefs supporting Umberson's (1993) view that just world beliefs have positive adaptive functions for underprivileged individuals. On the other hand, the gender related findings of the Hunt study demonstrated a different pattern; females had lower levels of JWB in comparison to males supporting the thesis that individuals experiencing injustice are less likely to see the world as a just place.

In general, literature in this field indicated little or no evidence regarding sex differences. For example, Furnham (1991) reported that "consistent with previous studies there was little evidence in the present study of sex differences" (p.326). Furthermore, O'Connor, Morrison, McLeod, and Anderson (1996) conducted a meta-analysis reviewing 33 studies. They concluded that in these studies there was only a slight difference, which is unlikely to reach a significant level, between females and males as to just world beliefs scores. Likewise, Durm and Stowers (1998) reported no sex differences in just world beliefs, however, their sample was considerably small involving 23 female and 23 male university students. In addition, in a recent study researching victim and perpetrator blaming and JWB, Sleath and Bull (2010) reported no sex differences in the just world beliefs of the undergraduates. To our best knowledge, research regarding gender and JWB is predominantly western. Western attitudes toward gender egalitarianism may differ from Islamic countries and even also from Mediterranean and central Asian ones.

Kyrgyzstan is a small country with a population of 5 million, located in central Asia. It has borders with China in the East, Tajikistan in the South, Kazakhstan in the North, and Uzbekistan in the West. It is among the least developed countries with a GDP per head of \$ 1108 in 2016 with 83.9 % of poverty rate (The World Bank, 2016a). Kyrgyzstan had long lived under socialist rule as part of the Soviet Socialist Union. After dissolution of Soviet Socialism, Kyrgyzstan has undergone

dramatic changes in the economic, political, and social life with increasing poverty and unemployment. According to Mikhalev and Henrich (1999), major consequences of the transition include a decline in living standards for the majority, the appearance of unemployment, radical shifts in the distribution of assets, increases in earnings inequality, and changes in the welfare system associated with the decline in major social benefits. They added that one of the most important outcomes has been the increasing social distance between the 'winners' and 'losers' of the reforms since Kyrgyzstan started the transition from a relatively egalitarian position but rapidly transformed into a highly polarized and stratified society with a limited scope for social mobility. In a report by the UNDP (2004), it was regarded as that the level of inequality had been reached a stage that could be called an *institutionalization of inequality*. According to a more recent opinion poll with a representative sample (2006), it was reported that the most pressing issues were unemployment, economic development, and corruption in Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, in terms of confidence, the judiciary system was rated as the least favorable institution among others in the country.

Under seventy years of socialist rules, which declared gender equality, women enjoyed relatively equal position to men in Kyrgyzstan. However, they still carried the double burden of performing the domestic role and taking a place in the workforce (Ashwin, 2002). During the turbulent years of transition to a market economy, in general, gender asymmetry and inequalities between men and women were more intensified since together with the worsening economic conditions the prior benefits women had were jeopardized (Ishkanian, 2003).

On the other hand, Turkey is a large country with a population of over 70 million. It is among the moderately developed countries with a GDP per head of \$ 9387 in 2015 with the poverty rate of 18.3 % (the World Bank, 2016b). In contrast to Kyrgyzstan, Turkey has taken part in capitalist economies from the start with some state owned and with some private enterprises. It has a relatively established democratic regime with higher levels of income and less corruption levels in comparison to Kyrgyzstan. Also, Turkey has applied to become a member of European Union. For over a century, the country has undergone a rapid modernization period in many aspects, such as more democratization and less inequalities between sexes. Spousal equality has been advocated by the state in Turkey (Duben and Behar, 1991). Similarly, Turkish legislation constantly improves in relation to equal opportunities on the route to European Union. However, females in Turkey as similar to most countries are disadvantaged in comparison to males regarding education level, income level, and participation in the decision making process in the society (United Nations, 2000; Rankin and Aytaç, 2006)

The aim of the present study was to expand the body of research on JWB by using a sample of Kyrgyz and Turkish students. JWB have been widely studied in North American and Western European contexts, however, to our best knowledge little research is available in Turkey (e.g., Göregenli, 2003; Jahic, 1999; Uğur & Akgün, 2015; Yıldırım & Akgün, 2013) and no research exists with Kyrgyz participants in this field. The present study was designed to compare two countries' people on JWB in relation to gender and country. Despite economical and governmental differences, both countries have some commonalities: these societies are considered as from the Turkic cultural background, both speak two dialects of the Turkish language, and a majority of the people believing in Islam. Drawing on the differences of GDP, signs of inequality, and corruption levels (Transparency International, 2009) in the two countries and also judging by the recent uprisings against the government in Kyrgyzstan we expected higher general and personal JWB scores in Turkey in comparison to Kyrgyzstan.

On the other hand, Turkish and Central Asian societies are considered as highly patriarchal. Although state initiated gender equality by Turkish republican reforms in Turkey and by socialist

state in Kyrgyzstan provided much gain for women, however, it did not eradicate the deeply rooted gender discrimination from the society (Güneş-Ayata & Acar, 2000). Therefore, we expected gender differences since the patriarchal past in the two countries favors males over females creating feelings of injustice. In accordance with this, females would have lower JWB scores in comparison to males.

We also expected a higher personal JWB in comparison to a general JWB since having access to a University in both countries could be considered as a privilege.

## Method

### *Participants*

The data were collected from Turkish and Kyrgyz university students in 2006. The Turkish sample consisted of 53 female and 51 male undergraduate volunteers (aged 18 to 29) studying at the Mersin University, Mersin, Turkey. The mean age was 22.31 and the standard deviation was 2.18.

The Kyrgyz sample was drawn from Kyrgyz University students (Manas University and National University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan). Eighty female and 40 male students (aged 17 to 25 years) volunteered for the study. The mean age of this group was 20.38 with standard deviation of 1.67.

### *Measures*

The just world beliefs were measured using the Personal Belief in a Just World Scale and the General Belief in a Just World Scale (Dalbert, 1999). The General Belief in a Just World Scale consists of six items, e.g., "I think basically the world is a just place". The Personal Belief in a Just World Scale has seven items, e.g., "I am usually treated fairly". For the Kyrgyz participants, the scale was translated into Russian by two professionals who were fluent in both languages. Also, items were further checked by three other professionals for accuracy of translation and clarity of language. The scale was translated into Russian since this language has been the main medium in education for years. It is also accepted as an official language together with the Kyrgyz language.

The Turkish versions of the General Belief in a Just World and the Personal Belief in a Just World Scales were translated into Turkish by Göregenli (2003). The General Belief in a Just World Scale had an alfa level of .69 and the Personal Belief in a Just World Scale had a fairly satisfactory alfa level of .86. The scales have been used by other Turkish researchers too (e.g, Uğur, 2008). For the present study, the reliability coefficient for The General Belief in a Just World Scale is .71 while it is .79 for the Personal Belief in a Just World Scale.

### *Procedure*

The demographics question form and the scales were completed anonymously during class time. It only took 10 to 15 minutes. All participants were informed that any information they provided would remain confidential and would be used only for the purposes of this research. The general and personal just world scales were applied inter-changeably in order to be able to balance the effects of the measurement operations on the revealed results. That is, half of the participants filled in the general just world beliefs scale first and then personal just world scale. On the other hand, the rest of the group filled in the personal just world beliefs scale first and then general just world beliefs scale.

## Results

The purpose of the present study was to compare Turkish and Kyrgyz students on general and personal just world beliefs. To achieve this, a 2 (country) x 2 (sex) multivariate factorial analysis of variance was performed. The means and standard deviations of the measures are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Means and Standard Deviations for Sex and Country for the Just World Beliefs (JWB)*

Country	Females		Males	
	M	SD	M	SD
Personal JWB				
Kyrgyzstan	23.35	4.49	25.80	3.77
Turkey	20.41	3.66	21.47	4.62
General JWB				
Kyrgyzstan	19.63	3.62	21.20	3.16
Turkey	16.39	4.42	18.72	4.52

The results of the univariate test (see Table 2) indicated that a significant difference was found between the Turkish and Kyrgyz students in relation to their general beliefs in a just world,  $F(1,220) = 27.26, p < .01$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .11$ ). Regarding this, the Kyrgyz students (20.41) had stronger general just world beliefs than the Turkish students (17.56). In a similar manner, the Turkish and Kyrgyz students differ in their personal just world beliefs  $F(1,220) = 38.95, p < .01$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .15$ ). The Kyrgyz students (24.57) also had stronger personal just world beliefs compared to the Turkish students (20.94).

Significant differences were also found between male and female students in general and personal just world beliefs, respectively  $F(1,220) = 12.64, p < .01$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$ ) and  $F(1,220) = 9.07, p < .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$ ). Male students had stronger general (19.96) and personal (23.63) just world beliefs than females (respectively, 18.02 and 21.88). There was no interaction effect between gender and country.

Table 2

*Summary of the Two Way Analysis of Variance for the General and Personal Just World Beliefs (JWB).*

Source	MS	F	$\eta^2$
Personal JWB			
Sex <sup>a</sup>	161.74	9.07*	.004
Country <sup>a</sup>	694.56	38.95**	.15
Sex x Country <sup>a</sup>	25.59	1.43	.006
General JWB			
Sex <sup>a</sup>	199.35	12.64**	.05
Country <sup>a</sup>	430	27.26**	.11
Sex x Country <sup>a</sup>	7.73	.49	.002

Note. Partial  $\eta^2$  = effect size.

<sup>a</sup>  $df = 1, 220$

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

## Discussion

In this study we examined the Just world beliefs in Turkey and Kyrgyzstan. Previous studies have found that people who have different ethnic backgrounds in the same society differed in their just world beliefs (e.g., Smith & Green, 1984; Hunt, 2000) due to experience with injustice and victimization (Furnham & Procter, 1989). Previous studies also found that people living in different societies and countries differed in JWBs due to the cultural and economic differences (Furnham, 1993). Our study differed from earlier studies. It was carried out with people supposedly from the same Turkic ethnic heritage but live in two different countries with differing GDP, inequality, and corruption levels. Likewise, in parallel with these studies, we also found differences between the Kyrgyz and Turkish participants in JWB.

We expected that, in comparison to the Turkish sample, the Kyrgyz sample would have lower general and personal just world beliefs, since indices of poverty, inequality, and corruption levels seem to be higher for Kyrgyzstan as a former socialist country and also political unrest in this country may indicate an unhappiness with the status quo. Earlier studies with poorer societies reported that people in these countries tend to believe that the world is not a just place (Furnham, 1993). Contrary to the expectations, we found that Kyrgyz students are higher in their JWB than the Turkish students in both general and personal Just world beliefs. These findings are in line with Umberson's (1993) study and the meta-analysis of Malahy et al., (2009), which found that while inequality increased so did just world beliefs. This supported the thesis that higher levels of just world beliefs, as is the case with the Kyrgyz sample, served as a stress buffering effect against the aftermaths of climbing poverty, joblessness, inequality, and corruption etc.

We found that there were significant differences between sexes, which we expected. These findings cannot be explained with the above mentioned view that in unfair circumstances, just world beliefs serve as a coping mechanism. Rather it supports the view that inequalities or unfairness breeds feelings of injustice in people. The fact that many previous studies have not found significant differences between sexes may be due to societal characteristics in which earlier studies were conducted. For instance, meta-analysis by O'Connor et al., (1996) was conducted with the samples from only English speaking countries. And also, a study by Furnham (1993), reported only slight differences between the sexes, but, did not include any Islamic country. In Turkey and Central Asia, traditionally the patriarchal family structure is prevalent. According to Inglehart and Norris (2003), accompanied by economic development, modernization brings systematic changes with regard to a women's status. In countries with more advanced industry, young people endorse more egalitarian gender role attitudes in comparison to less advanced countries, in which Turkey and more of Kyrgyzstan takes a place in this category. Although in both countries, state-initiated (recently talks of positive discrimination on the agenda in Turkish parliament) gender equality efforts have made considerable advancement, however, there is still much to do. For example, according the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2007) regarding inequalities in economic participation, educational attainment, wellbeing, and political empowerment between sexes, Turkey was ranked as the 121<sup>st</sup> country and Kyrgyzstan as the 70th country of 128 countries. This may indicate that Kyrgyzstan was still under the influence of the gender egalitarian communist ideology (see also, Spierings, Smits, & Verloo, 2009).

Overall, as is the case in of Hunt (2000) and Umberson's (1993) studies, findings of the present study provided partial support for both views. Country comparisons provided support for the view that increasing perceptions of injustice lead individuals' commitment to JWB, which promotes well-being (see for a review Furnham, 2003; Lerner, 1980; Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996). In contrast, sex related comparisons provided support for the view that experiences of injustice make individuals less likely to believe the world is a just place.

### Conclusion

Belief in a just world is a valuable resource for individuals to maintain their well-being. Therefore, it deserves research from the sphere of all societies. The strength of our study is that it was conducted in two developing, relatively less studied, and non-western countries, Turkey and Kyrgyzstan. The results of the present study has some implications for our understanding of just world belief regarding gender and society. That is, on the contrary to more developed countries, women might have lower Just World beliefs than men in relatively traditional societies such as Turkey and Kyrgyzstan, although this finding needs further scrutiny in future studies. Furthermore, findings of the present study supported the notion that individuals from economically deprived and judicially more corrupt countries might have (in our case Kyrgyzstan) high levels of just world beliefs since just world beliefs provides positive adaptive functions for underprivileged individuals.

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