The Just World Hypothesis as an argumentative resource in debates about unemployment benefits

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Abstract:

The concept of the 'just world' is established as a key explanation for how people make sense of inequality, so that those deemed to score high in belief in a 'just world' are more likely to hold prejudicial beliefs and to blame people in poverty for their situations. However, this is an inadequate explanation for such complicated and controversial issues. To better understand talk about the 'just world' and the controversial issue of the distribution of unemployment benefits (an issue of inequality) a discursive psychological approach to the 'just world' is used. Therefore, a discourse analysis focusses on two feature length British televised discussions about benefit claimants called 'The Big Benefit Row: Live' (Channel 5 3/2/2014) and 'Benefits Britain: the Debate' (Channel 4 17/2/2014). The analysis demonstrates that people draw on both just and unjust world arguments simultaneously and also topicalise what counts as just so as to support their positions on unemployment benefits, rather than in the consistent way that 'just world' theory would predict. It is therefore argued that the 'just world' should be recast as a cultural value that facilitates arguments about benefits, rather than an internally held belief.

Key words:

Just World hypothesis; Belief in a Just World; Discursive Psychology; Inequality; Benefits; Welfare; Distribution of Wealth; Discourse Analysis

Introduction

There are limited psychological explanations for understanding how people make sense of welfare payments. One possible explanation is provided by research on the just world hypothesis (JWH), which refers to a belief that the world is fair. It will be argued and demonstrated that the 'just world' should not be understood as a belief, but rather as an ideology that allows people to argue for or against the distribution of welfare benefits.

Public spending, and in particular spending on welfare benefits, has been the focus of increased scrutiny in the UK since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. In an attempt to deal with the crisis, a number of countries have engaged in 'austerity' policies, designed to cut public spending (including the UK's Welfare Reform Act, 2012). These policies are inevitably controversial as they mark a tension between the costs of tax-funded services and the human costs of removing services. The costs of benefits are indeed high: in 2012-13, £201.8bn [approximately $300bn] was spent on benefits and personal tax credits of which approximately 2.6% went on unemployment benefit (Browne & Hood 2012, p. 7). Views about benefit expenditure are varied with 52% of British people claiming these benefits are 'too generous', 19% 'about right' and 17% not generous enough (DWP 2013:5). Heightened interest in benefits can be seen in the broadcasting of the '*Benefits Street*' documentary series by Channel 4 in 2014. The series attracted 4.3m viewers (Channel 4's most watched programme that year) and media attention, controversy and public debate throughout the UK, including questions asked in Parliament.

Much of our understanding about the welfare state has been the preserve of sociology (Stenner and Taylor, 2008). This means that a thorough understanding informed by social psychology is missing from this topic. Access to welfare had traditionally been viewed as a basic 'social right' that British citizens were entitled to when required (Conover et al, 1991, p. 811). More recently there has been a shift from viewing welfare as a remedy for external social factors (such as structural unemployment and globalisation), towards placing responsibility for the necessity of welfare onto individuals. This culminated in the rebranding of unemployment benefit as 'jobseeker's allowance' which shifts the burden of responsibility onto individual claimants who by definition are to be actively looking for jobs (Clarke, 2005). This shift increases the burden upon the individual in regards to their responsibilities as a good citizen (Dean, 2004, p. 71). This is reflected in an increase in public discourse around the role of the individual (Stenner and Taylor, 2008, p. 421) regarding their welfare, which

arguably results in unemployment and low incomes being perceived to be the result of individual failure as opposed to external conditions (Jo, 2012). Indeed, Paterson, Coffey-Glover and Pepplow (2015) assessed participants' beliefs about clips from *Benefits Street* and found that these functioned as prompts to discuss the negative characteristics of benefit claimants as a general category.

There is, however, much that psychology has to offer this topic. Attribution theory has been applied to beliefs about welfare. For example, Furnham showed how individualistic explanations for unemployment, are favoured by those who score highly on political conservatism (1982a) and the protestant work ethic (1982b) and that both of these beliefs are associated with holding negative opinions of welfare claimants (1985). In addition to being associated with individualistic explanations, conservatism (Wilson, 1973) and protestant work ethic (Furnham, 1982b) also correlate with the Belief in a Just World (henceforth BJW), which also offers a psychological explanation for beliefs about welfare claimants.

Just World Hypothesis

The 'just world hypothesis' (JWH) was formulated by Lerner (1965) as an erroneous lay explanation for negative events. He stated that 'A Just World is one in which people "get what they deserve"' (Lerner, 1980, p. 11). The implication for welfare claimants, according to people who hold this view, is that they are in need of support because of a fault of their own, whereas those in work deserve their relatively superior affluence. The JWH therefore may explain the popularity of the individualist explanations identified by Jo (2012) and Furnham (1983) who showed that employed people are likely to view those in receipt of welfare as lacking the necessary effort to find a job. Research on the JWH began experimentally, addressing situations far removed from beliefs about welfare claimants, such as beliefs about innocent victims of injustices in which it was demonstrated that such victims could be blamed for their misfortune rather than presenting it as unfair (e.g. Lerner, 1980).

Later work in JWH moved from experiments to attitude-based studies. Rubin and Peplau devised 'an attitudinal continuum extending between two poles of total acceptance and total rejection of the notion that the world is a just place' (1975, p. 66) and it is through the use of this scale that claims about just world correlates are based. The development of this scale led to debate about whether belief in a just world (BJW) is an attributional style similar to those discussed above, or a personality factor (Ellard & Lerner, 1982). Lipkus, Dalbert, and Siegler (1996) argue that BJW can be separated into the two dimensions of 'BJW Self' and 'BJW

Other', where people believe that the world is just for them or others, linking these styles into personality types. Bègue and Bastounis (2003) built on this by suggesting that those high in 'BJW Other' support discrimination towards victim groups, whereas those high in 'BJW Self' are more prosocial. However, it will be argued here that neither a personality factor nor attributional style best describes the JWH, which instead should be understood as an ideology.

Discursive and Rhetorical Psychological explanations for arguments about benefits

Although there are some important differences between discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992) and the related perspective of rhetorical psychology (e.g. Billig 1991; 1995; 1997; Billig et al, 1998), both have been used to argue that the traditional cognitive approach to psychology, where individuals are considered to have stable and consistent internal beliefs (such as in the idea of a belief in a 'just world') are problematic. Instead, from a discursive perspective, they argue that displays of beliefs or attitudes should be viewed as designed to perform actions within specific contexts and for Billig they are recast as ideological positions. Billig argues that an 'ideology comprises the ways of thinking and behaving within a given society which make the ways of that society seem 'natural' or unquestioned to its members' (1997, p. 48) and is therefore the 'common sense of the society' (1997, p. 48) which may be used to explain away inequality as inevitable. Billig et al. demonstrate further that ideology is not straightforward, but that 'it is reproduced as an incomplete set of contrary themes, which continually give rise to discussion, argumentation and dilemmas' (1988, p. 6). From this it could be assumed that the just world hypothesis represents an ideology, or a common-sense idea that can be used to explain inequality, but that may itself be contradictory and therefore giving rise to debates and discussions about what exactly is just. Indeed, the entire notion of welfare is arguably based on an ideological dilemma (Billig et al., 1988) with Billig (1982, p.200) suggesting that there is 'a recognition of injustice, with a counterbalancing 'on the other hand' to support the idea that some poor people deserve their situation'. This fundamental dilemma appears to underpin much of the ideological arguments over whether or not welfare is desirable.

Gibson (2009) adds weight to the suggestion that attribution styles or other internally held beliefs are not appropriate for understanding how people argue about welfare claimants, by highlighting how findings based on the attribution approach ignore the action-oriented (Edwards and Potter, 1992) nature of talk. This means that talk about topics (and especially

controversial ones involving the allocation of public spending) is always designed to *do* something, such as to justify and support (or oppose) the awarding of state funding to particular groups of people in society, which means that the ways that people talk about this highly political topic can be viewed as social in nature.

Billig (1991) argues that when debating a particular ideology, speakers can draw upon a range of different interpretative repertoires, which are defined as 'terms and metaphors [that can be] drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 138). If the 'just world' is to be understood as an ideology, then it would be expected that there would be a range of these repertoires that are grounded in just world ideology which could be invoked in discussions about benefits. Therefore, instead of attempting to ascertain the extent to which people have a *belief* in a 'just world' it is more productive to attend to how arguments that may invoke a 'just world' are used in discussions about topics such as welfare distribution. One such repertoire has been identified by Gibson in his analysis of an internet discussion forum entitled 'Is the welfare system working?' Gibson called this the 'effortfulness' repertoire (2009, p. 397) because the concept of effort was used to account both for people's (un)employment (those who worked were effortful and those who did not were not) and also for the speakers' own accountability, as well as that of the government. The 'effortfulness' repertoire draws on the ideology of the 'just world' because those who are unemployed are deemed to have brought on their situation themselves because of their own (lack of) effort. Gibson's work, which focuses on the specific context of the discussion forum, remains the current extent of discursive psychological literature addressing arguments about benefits. Nevertheless, the concept of the 'just world hypothesis' continues to be problematically treated as something that can be measured as a belief so as to explain arguments about benefits and inequality (e.g. Bègue and Bastounis, 2003; Campbell, Carr, and McLachlan, 2001). The aim of the current research is therefore to develop an understanding of how talk about the 'just world' is used in televised arguments about the distribution of benefits.

Methodological approach

The data used in this study comes from high profile televised discussions that followed Channel 4's '*Benefits Street*[i]' programme, partly as a result of the controversy generated by the original programme, meaning that these programmes were capitalising on this attention.

The original programme courted controversy[ii] after allegedly tricking the residents of James Turner Street, Birmingham, into a programme in which benefit claimants were deemed to be shown in a negative light. Both Channels 4 (who showed the original programme) and 5 aired a debate programme following the end of the first series of Benefits Street in early 2014. These programmes therefore offered a unique opportunity to examine the arguments and explanations for the issues around the distribution of benefits that were featured in the original programme, prompting controversial responses. This controversy arguably raises the stakes for those involved in the discussions, who can be seen explicitly referencing people featured in *Benefits Street* in the debates. Channel 5 aired theirs first, called '*The Big Benefit Row: Live*' (3/2/2014) which was followed by Channel 4's '*Benefits Britain: the Debate*' (17/2/2014). Both programmes followed a similar format, with a panel of invited speakers including people featured in the programme, politicians and commentators as well as a studio audience. The debate programmes broadcast for an hour and in total without adverts are around 45 minutes long. The programmes were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the addition of tagged on speech (=), speakers quoting others ("") and questioning intonation (?), by the second author.

A discursive psychological approach (Edwards and Potter, 1992) is used to address this research question. In an analysis of this type the analyst attempts to identify how language is used to achieve a number of ends including: managing the speaker's accountability and the accountability of others, blaming and defending, constructing identities, supporting arguments, in this case regarding the distribution of benefits, and supporting or challenging inequalities. The transcripts were initially read for references to justice and fairness, which relate to the concept of the 'just world', to ascertain what these references were being used to do. The analysis soon made it apparent that notions of justice and fairness that related to the social psychological concept of the just world hypothesis were being topicalized and debated. These examples, some of which are presented below, were analysed in further detail. This involved identifying the ways in which situations were presented as just or not, what discursive and rhetorical features of the talk were drawn upon to do this, and what these features of the talk were designed to accomplish in the interaction, particularly regarding support for or against the payment of benefits. Details of speakers are presented with each extract.

Analysis

The analysis of the data demonstrates that arguments relevant to just world ideology are used in a range of sophisticated ways both for and against the distribution of benefits to unemployed people. It will be shown that 'just world' arguments are used to place responsibility for being on benefits with unemployed people and arguments that the world is unjust are used to place accountability outside of unemployed people. However, arguments around a 'just world' can also be far more complicated. It is also shown that what counts as just is topicalised and debated, that speakers can draw upon arguments that the world is both just and unjust simultaneously, and that arguments that the world is unjust can be used in the service of 'just world' arguments.

This analysis begins with an extract where the chair, Matthew Wright, directs a question to Emma, who was featured in *Benefits Street* (no surname is presented), who is also addressed by former Conservative politician, now broadcaster, Edwina Currie. Here an *un*just world argument is deployed and then countered with a *just* world argument.

Extract one: *The Big Benefits Row: Live*

1. Wright   Highest youth unemployment isn't it, that we've had, isn't that right?
2. Emma   It's not my fault I can't get a job I tried. I tried my CV is at
3. Currie   Try harder.
4. Emma   Every day, I try, every day I try, every day I try, every day. I do my
5.   best to try.
6. Currie   We are importing people from all over the world to do the jobs she
7.   won't do.
8. Emma   I can't sit on my arse and do nothing.

This extract contains both a *just* world argument and an *un*just world argument. As may be predicted by previous literature on the just world hypothesis, the *just* world argument is used to account for people being on benefits because of their own lack of effort, while an *un*just world argument is used to suggest that external factors (i.e. a lack of jobs) are to blame.

The extract begins with the chair (Matthew Wright) drawing on an external factor ('youth unemployment' line 1). This is presented as problematic through the reference to 'highest' and is then presented as factual through the negative question formation 'isn't that right' (line 1). This allows Emma to align with this statement and to use it to account for her (and

arguably, by extension, others featured in *Benefits Street*) unemployed status. Emma attends to her agency by explicitly denying that she is to blame for her status and demonstrating that she has put in the appropriate effort (Gibson, 2009) necessary to pre-empt accusations of being lazy or that her unemployment is her own fault. The references to 'try[ing]' further work to undermine the potential accusation that she is lazy, and the reference to a CV adds detail that bolsters her case for being a job seeker. This demonstrates an orientation to just world ideology which states that benefit claimants are to blame for being on benefits because they are lazy. Her reference to a lack of a job, in spite of her effort, and at a time of high unemployment, demonstrates that this is an *un*just world argument.

Edwina Currie responds to Emma's turn with a simple order: 'try harder' (line 3). This works to undermine Emma's argument by challenging the extent to which she has been trying; the implication is that she has not tried hard enough and so lacks appropriate effort and is therefore accountable for being unemployed. This is a *just* world argument because Emma is presented as responsible for her situation as a result of her own lack of effort.

Emma orients to Currie's claim as a personal criticism and responds by claiming that she does try, emphasised through the repetition of 'I try' (line 4) and the upgrading of the claim through the use of 'every day' (line 4) which is stated four times. The fifth time that she claims to 'try' also includes the phrase 'I do my best' (lines 4-5), further demonstrating that this argument is about effortfulness. Currie responds by referring to immigrant labour, in a bid to demonstrate that Emma is not as effortful as she claims, because by contrast immigrant workers are deemed to be more effortful. The phrase 'jobs she won't do' (lines 6-7) redirects a potentially general argument about people on benefits to Emma personally. Once more, Emma challenges the suggestion that she lacks effort by rejecting the idiom for laziness, 'sit on my arse and doing nothing' (line 8).

What is at stake, therefore, is the extent to which Emma (and, by extension, the benefit claimants she is representing in the context of the debate) is judged to be accountable for her situation, because if she is accountable then it is *just* that she is unemployed, but if she is not accountable then it is *un*just. At this point, the findings could arguably be used to support the concept of the 'just world' as an internally held belief, as it could be claimed that Currie would score high for BJW and that Emma would score low. However, this would ignore the argumentative nature of this debate over Emma's supposed effort and the stake and interest (Edwards & Potter, 1992) that both parties have in positioning her as effortful or not. This

means that either Emma or the job market, and therefore individuals or financial systems, are to blame. This following extract demonstrates that discussions about a just/unjust world are rarely this straightforward, with the very concept of justice and fairness being open to debate. This extract features the chair, Richard Bacon, and Mike Penning MP, who at the time was (Conservative) minister for Work and Pensions.

Extract two: *Benefits Britain: The Live Debate*

1. Penning: I didn't phrase it that way, what we saw and why we put the benefit
2.   cap in is that I've got nurses and trainee firemen in my constituency
3.   earning less than what the benefit cap is which is why we had to put a
4.   benefit cap in there and why we have to say to the people is that we
5. Bacon: Why not, why not have a benefits
6. Penning: Cannot just continue to pay more and more
7. Bacon: Why not cut benefits for, why not cut benefits for rich pensioners?
8.   What's the reason?
9. Penning: They've paid in all their lives
10. Bacon: But they're wealthy, they're wealthy
11. Penning: and they've worked hard
12. Bacon: But they're milking the system
13. Penning: That's why.
14. Audience *Applause*

Mike Penning begins the extract by arguing in favour of a benefit cap that the government of the time had introduced. This argument is based on the premises of economics and fairness. This is ostensibly grounded in 'just world' ideology that is based on the idea that hard working (effortful) people should be better off than those who are not. The effortful people that are identified in this extract (nurses and firemen) are examples of public servants in arguably moral roles, which builds in an element of extra deservedness. However, by drawing attention to low pay amongst necessary jobs, Penning is actually drawing attention to a *lack* of justice for workers, which means that an argument based upon a *just* world seemingly contains elements of an *un*just world too, which hints at just world ideology being dilemmatic (Billig et al., 1988).

Next, the chair of the debate, Richard Bacon suggests an alternative group where cuts to benefits could be made: wealthy pensioners. This opens up a debate about what constitutes fairness, with Bacon suggesting that it is unfair to give benefits to already wealthy people and Penning continuing the effortfulness argument. What is particularly interesting about this exchange is that it demonstrates that opponents in a debate can *both* draw upon 'just world' ideology to argue for entirely opposite ends, with Bacon suggesting a limit on benefits for wealthy people as *just*, while Penning suggests that this would be an *un*just action because despite being wealthy, these people have demonstrated effortfulness. This means that the concept of justice, like the 'just world', is also a concept with differing constructions and uses. It appears to be the effort-based argument 'they've worked hard' (line 11) that elicits the audience applause which would suggest that, at least in this specific context, effortfulness is a more effective just world argument than a just world argument not based on effortfulness. Importantly this suggests that just world ideology does not necessarily have straightforward implications for how justice should be administered.

To illustrate the further complicated use of *just* and *un*just world ideology, in the following example it will be shown that both just and unjust world arguments can be drawn upon simultaneously, here in order to both criticise the benefits system, but also to emphasise the individual responsibility of benefits claimants. Here Richard Bacon questions Douglas Murray, who writes for the right of centre publication the Spectator.

Extract three: *Benefits Britain: The Live Debate*

1. Bacon   Ok, ok. Er, Douglas Murray, um from The Spectator, do you think in
2.   general terms, I mean Alison is alluding there I think, to people gaming
3.   the system when you look at why people are on benefits long term,
4.   why they're long term unemployed, this is the point that actually Dee
5.   was also actually making at the end of that film that we saw there. She
6.   was saying it's the government's fault. Is it the government's fault or
7.   is it down to individuals who are, who are, who are milking it?
8. Murray   I think very clearly it's a bit of both er its undeniable I, I think and er
9.   Dee made this point in the Spectator last week in her diary is that that
10.   there is a problem in the system which she is caught in and a number of
11.   people are caught in, a large number of people in this country that the

12.		benefits system is such that they would actually be penalised if they
13.		began to work. They would be paying tax effectively for the first
14.		thousands of earnings at ninety plus per cent because they will be
15.		losing out to work and they have realised as along with a lot of other
16.		people that it is better for them not to work than to work and that is a
17.		serious problem.
18.	Bacon:	Yep
19.	Murray:	in the system. I think everyone from every political side recognises
20.	Bacon:	Yep
21.	Murray:	should be addressed.
22.	Bacon:	And what is your feeling about…
23.	Murray:	But some other, one other quick thing which is the personal
24.		responsibility thing is obviously part of=
25.	Bacon:	= On that point, here's a quote from you, this is you,
26.		Douglas Murray, Spectator, "it is not just irresponsible but deeply
27.		irresponsible to bring a child into the world if you do not have the
28.		means to support that child, let alone no intention of obtaining such
29.		means".
30.	Murray:	Yes. I think a lot of people in this country who are working and paying
31.		taxes and worry very much about whether they can afford a first child,
32.		a second child let alone a third child would be looking at people on this
33.		programme and thinking why are people who are paying nothing in
34.		to the system not apparently having any of those concerns?
35.	Bacon:	Are people from the show, from Benefits Street people here, people
36.		you think should not have had those children?
37.	Murray:	I wouldn't say that. That's not what… That's not, I, I am not going to
38.		say it

This extract begins with Richard Bacon, quoting Dee (who was featured in *Benefits Street* and at the time became a minor celebrity), setting out the argument over who is accountable for people being unemployed (and therefore on benefits). It is this issue of accountability that underpins the just/unjust nature of the debate because it can be understood that if benefits claimants are personally accountable then the world is *just*, but that if external factors are to blame then the world is *un*just. The notion of belief in a just world here would be used to

suggest that those scoring high in this belief would hold the benefits claimants personally responsible ('milking it', line 7) and those scoring low in belief would blame external factors ('the government' line 6), much like what happened in extract one. However, what follows (line 8) is a dilemmatic acceptance of both a *just* and *un*just world simultaneously. This holding of two opposing positions is not presented as in any way problematic or contradictory, but instead is presented as a personal belief ('I think', line 8) as a way of managing this ideological dilemma.

Douglas Murray then goes on to support the *un*just world argument, which is that benefit claimants would be worse off if they worked. This is presented as a problem with the 'system' (line 10), which has been shown to be an effective argument as it does not blame specific individuals but a much more impersonal target (e.g. Goodman et al, 2014). This argument is backed up with reference to Dee, who, as a high-profile benefit recipient, may be expected to be an opponent of Murray's. It is of note that while this argument does draw on an *un*just world, there is still an element of personal responsibility of benefit claimants who have agency in deciding ('have realised' line 15) to avoid work. Murray manages this ideological dilemma by criticising the benefits system while avoiding making claims about the availability of jobs, which allows him to hold on to effort as an ideal, because the problem here is presented as being one where effort is not being rewarded. Murray ends his turn on this matter by speaking on behalf of all politicians (line 19), which is an effective footing (Goffman, 1981) to present this as a matter that has wide agreement.

While Bacon attempts to introduce a new question (line 22), Murray continues to offer the other – *just* world – part of the argument which is the personal responsibility of benefit claimants. This is presented as self-evident ('obviously' line 24) and is presented after his criticism of the benefits 'system' which works sequentially to present this as a bigger factor in determining if someone is on benefits or not. However, before being able to continue with elaborating on this point, he is interrupted by Bacon (line 25) who then directly quotes Murray criticising benefit claimants for having multiple children. As direct quotes such as these have been shown to be undeniable (e.g. Antaki & Leudar, 2001), Murray agrees (line 30) this point about personal responsibility, which draws upon just world ideology. In doing so, Murray draws upon an *un*just world argument which is that working people (who are effortful) may not be able to afford to have children.

This situation is inherently *un*just as, if the world were just, workers should have this opportunity, but the injustice is presented as even worse because people who are not working (and who have just been presented as individually responsible for their situation) are able to do so. Even more *un*just still is the implication that the effortless people are able to avoid 'concerns' (line 34) about the costs of having children at the expense of the effortful workers. Murray changes his footing again so that it is now an unspecified 'lot of people in this country' (line 30) who are presented as having concerns. It is necessary to present these concerns as not only Murray's own, because as can be seen in the following turns (lines 37-38), any suggestion of moralising about who can and cannot have children is presented as especially sensitive and potentially problematic. What this extract demonstrates is that an *un*just world argument is here being used to support what may initially appear to be a *just* world argument. This further demonstrates the complicated and dilemmatic use of just and unjust world arguments.

In this final extract, the notion of it being unjust for workers to pay for benefit claimants, especially because benefits claimants' unemployed status is attributed to their own actions (a *just* world argument), is developed further. Here the chair Matthew Wright is speaking to Katie Hopkins, a controversial right-wing columnist.

Extract four: *The Big Benefits Row: Live*

1. Wright: No jobs, Katie, no jobs? We're a caring society we look after the needy
2.   we pay our taxes, the National Health Service was born out of this
3.   desire to care and yet, you don't want people looked after when they
4.   haven't got a job.
5. Hopkins: I really don't care. People I care about are the people I want to talk for
6.   are those people that are working hard. Those people that are doing the
7.   fourteen hour shifts to make it pay=
8. Wright: = These people may be getting tax credits which is one of
9.   the big stresses on the welfare state.
10. [Wright and Hopkins speak over each other]
11. Hopkins: Matt, what we are going to hear, what we are going to hear over
12.   and over again tonight from the left wing loons, we are going to
13.   hear, ah but most people on benefits and Kenneth, most people on
14.   benefits already have jobs, they do work, but do you know what

14

15.   I want to talk about are people like White Dee that don't have jobs

16.   that sit at home don't go to work. We're paying for them to sit

17.   there watching telly.

Wright directly questions Hopkins by invoking an *un*just world argument, which is that there are no jobs available for unemployed people to take, which places responsibility for being on benefits outside of unemployed people. Hopkins is criticised for being uncaring through a distinction that is made between us ('we' line 1) who are caring and her ('you' line 3) who is not and is therefore presented as morally inferior through the use of 'yet'. Unemployed people are presented passively as not having jobs (3-4) rather than with agency (for example 'who choose not to work') which bolsters the *un*just world credentials of Wright's argument. Here, caring for people is presented as *just* and, using a three-part list (lines 1-3), is presented as characteristic of society. This means that justice is presented as a core ideology and that violating this (as Hopkins is accused) can form the warrant for criticism. This suggests that there is a norm of supporting justice and that violating this norm may be problematic.

It would therefore be expected that disagreement from Hopkins would be difficult here, especially if she is to avoid being presented as uncaring and/or unfair. However, Hopkins does reject Wright's formulation (5-7). The use of 'really' (5) preceding 'don't care' highlights the contentious and bold nature of the disagreement. Hopkins, nevertheless, rejects Wright's implication that this means she is not a caring person, and instead she immediately moves to show that she does care (5). This display of caring is brought about by contrasting the deserving, hardworking (effortful) people with those who do not work (who are not effortful). Hopkins explicitly highlights her footing by saying that it is these workers that she is talking for (5). An extreme case formulation is then used to highlight the hardworking characteristics of workers (6-7) and through her signalling of care for and support of these workers they are presented as ideal and morally superior.

After more debate about workers also receiving benefits and 'left wing loons' (lines 8-14), Hopkins returns to her point which is based on a distinction between effortful workers and unemployment benefit claimants who are glossed as 'people like White Dee' (14) (who is also present in the debate). These benefit claimants are criticised because they 'sit at home' (14) and 'don't go to work' (14-15) and are therefore lacking effort. A clear distinction is made between us ('we') and 'them' (15) (Leudar, Marsland & Nekvapil, 2004); we pay after

working hard while they are paid by us to do nothing, which is signalled through the negative 'sit there watching telly' (15). What is especially interesting about this argument is that while the *just* world argument which states that benefits claimants are responsible for their own situation is clearly being used here, it is also being used alongside an *un*just world argument where effortful hard workers are presented as unfairly having to support the effort*less* unemployed people who choose not to work. This means that *just* and *un*just world arguments are being used together to argue against benefits being given to unemployed people.

Discussion

It is only in the first extract where the predictions based on the JWH being a *belief* could possibly be supported. In the remaining extracts there are much more sophisticated and nuanced uses of talk based on just and unjust world arguments. In extract two what counts as just is itself the topic of the debate, with both speakers arguing for opposing policies (removing benefits from the unemployed or wealthy pensioners) by drawing on the notion of fairness. In this particular case, it appears that the 'just world' argument that is grounded in effortfulness (Gibson, 2009) is more rhetorically effective than the 'just world' argument based on fairness, but without reference to effortfulness. This demonstrates two important findings with significance for the 'just world'. First, two parties can both draw upon just world ideology and still be in disagreement. This casts doubt on a simple relationship between believing in a just world and related behaviours (such as endorsing particular policies). Second, this suggests that within 'just world' arguments, effortfulness is a central concept that may be more persuasive than other just world arguments. It is yet to be seen whether this also occurs in other contexts.

It is also shown that speakers can draw on both just and unjust world arguments simultaneously. This finding challenges the idea of the 'just world' being an internally held belief or a personality factor (Ellard & Lerner, 1982; Rubin & Peplau 1975) as it would not make sense for people to hold contradictory attitudes where they accept that the world is both just and unjust simultaneously.

The most complicated use of just and unjust world arguments can be seen when the just world argument is used to present benefit claimants as personally responsible for their unemployment while also using an unjust world argument where effortful people are

presented as unfairly having to pay for these purportedly effortless people. Even Bègue and Bastounis's (2003) argument that belief in a just world can be split into 'BJW Other' and 'BJW Self' is insufficient in explaining this which casts further doubt on the 'just world' as being a stable, internally held belief.

While it is argued that the JWH cannot be understood as an attribution style, a personality factor, or an attitude, the idea of a 'just world' did indeed provide the basis for a number of arguments that are used largely to criticise benefit claimants and to blame them for their own situation. This shows us that while just world ideology can underpin these arguments, there is certainly no evidence of a genuine *belief* that the world is just. It is therefore argued that the 'just world' should not be understood as an attitude, but in line with the DP approach, it offers resources for speakers to draw upon in arguments about controversial topics, in this case distribution of wealth to unemployed people. This does not mean that the concept of the 'just world' should be abandoned as a useful one for social psychological enquiry; it clearly represents an important ideology that in turn offers speakers a range of resources to support arguments about benefit claimants. However, there is no evidence here of a psychological need for people to believe that the world is fair; there is no 'fundamental delusion' operating to help people accept the world as it is (Lerner, 1980). Instead both fairness *and* unfairness are drawn upon to criticise benefits claimants. It is through orientations to the ideology of the 'just world' that speakers become required to construct what counts as just as well as managing their moral identities in ways that show them to be adhering to this value. It is therefore proposed that the 'just world' be recast as a persuasive ideology that provides rhetorical resources for speakers, rather than as an internally held belief.

In this way, the just world can be an extremely useful concept. As an ideology, the following quote from Lerner paraphrasing his students' talk about unemployed people living in the United States at the time, which could easily have been lifted from the debates following *Benefits Street* a generation later in another country, takes on a deeper meaning. It demonstrates that when Lerner developed the concept of the just world hypothesis, he was attending to it as an ideological argument that could be used to justify the negative impacts of social inequality:

> Those people were happy living like that. They were just the kind of folks who would cheat and connive and let their kids go hungry rather than go out and get a decent job. There was plenty of work for everyone if they just wanted it – if they'd just go out and look for it. No one had to go hungry. They were lazy, irresponsible. Just look at what they did with their welfare checks. They

bought liquor, made payments on a TV while their kids went without meat and vegetables, shoes, decent clothing, etc. what kind of a parent, human being, would live like that? (Lerner, 1980, p. 4)

It has therefore been shown that the 'just world' does have relevance in debates about benefit claimants, but that it should be understood as an ideology, a cultural value that can be used to support arguments about benefits, rather than as an internally held belief. The 'just world' is used flexibly by speakers to perform a range of different actions in supporting and challenging benefits payments for unemployed people.

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