



Life is not Fair: Get Used to It! A Personal Perspective on Contemporary Social Justice Research

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Abstract

This paper offers a very personal perspective on the Social Justice research world, much of which is to be found in this journal. It is my contention that this research has become too inward looking and detached from other mainstream and important issues. I also highlight some areas that I think neglected such as the Problem of Evil and Stoicism as a coping mechanism for misfortune.

Keywords Justice · Fairness · Coping

Introduction

Many academic disciplines are interested in the concept of justice, particularly law, philosophy, sociology and theology. Justice is about equality/equity, fairness, impartiality, legality, and trustfulness. However, one person's justice is another's injustice, and there is the rub: Most people would say justice is desirable, it is how they diversely define (and hope to achieve) it that can be the (academic) problem.

The title of this paper comes from the famous advice of the multi-billionaire Bill Gates who said young people should accept the realities of life. He noted that they needed to keep striving for success despite the obstacles that stand in our way. Instead of giving up or being discouraged, strive to be resilient and find ways to overcome challenges. It was not a call to campaign against injustice, but rather a way to try to cope with the inevitable truth. A friend, however, suggested I add “*So get used to challenging it*” arguing as so many Justice Researchers do, that we should all “get involved”, while I believe there may be a time and place to simply accept the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”.

Psychology too has had a long-standing research agenda into justice. *Developmental psychologists* are interested in moral development, and how children come to understand fairness and justice in the world. *Social psychologists* have been

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interested in how people understand and react to justice and injustice, as well as, most importantly in their view, how to reduce injustice. *Personality/Differential* psychologists have been interested in systematic individual differences in beliefs about, and behaviour relating to, various forms of justice. *Clinical psychologists* have been concerned with how people cope with injustices visited upon themselves and others. *Forensic psychologists* have become concerned with how best to deal with those who are perpetrators or victims of injustice. *Work psychologists* have also been interested in Humanitarian Work Psychology, are concerned with how fair incomes and treatment in, and at, work can benefit groups and individuals alike. More recently, *Environmental psychologists* have become very involved in these issues especially concerns with climate change, farming practices and misuse of environmental resources.

As Torres-Harding et al., (2012) noted, “social justice is consistently described as a value or belief, encompassing the idea that people should have equitable access to resources and protection of human rights. In addition, definitions of social justice typically involve power. Each definition encompasses the idea that structural and social inequalities should be minimized, and that society should work toward empowerment with people from disadvantaged or disempowered groups. Thus, participation, collaboration, and empowerment are all key components of social justice work. Social justice is a fundamental value of the community psychology field, particularly due to its emphasis on eliminating oppressive social conditions and promoting wellness” (p. 78).

In this paper, I will offer some personal reflections on social justice research. I was asked to reflect on a some very specific questions which I do in the conclusion.

The Bigger Picture

As noted above, most of the social sciences have been interested in justice, because of the importance and relevance of this topic to so much in life. People are confronted with injustices of many kinds and have to try to make sense of, and then deal with them. The more interesting question though is, when and how do people decide some system is actually broken, and needs fixing itself.

Ellenbogen (1986) in a very memorable and humorous way distinguished between how different religions understand injustice, and how psychotherapists deal with it. Of course, these are rather simple-minded stereotypes, and possibly even “offensive” to certain groups, because of the way they try to encapsulate and distinguish between various conceptualisations of injustice. Nevertheless, I believe it illustrates forcefully some of the numerous and profound differences in the ways injustice/evil/sh*t is considered.

It is clear injustice, here described as “sh*t happens” is an extremely important issue and that many struggle for an explanation for its existence, but also how to cope with it. It is very big topic indeed. The fundamental “take-away” for me is take a much wider view.

<i>Spiritual truth</i>	<i>Manifest truth</i>
Taoism	Sh*t Happens
Confucianism	Confucius say, "Sh*t happens"
Buddhism	If shi*t happens, it isn't really sh*t
Hinduism	This sh*t happened before
Islam	If sh*t happens, it is the will of Allah
Protestantism	Sh*t happens to other people
Catholicism	If sh*t happens you deserve it
Agnosticism	I won't believe this sh*t unless I see it
Atheism	I don't believe in this sh*t
Judaism	Why does this sh*t always happen to us?
Southern Baptist	You go to Hell for saying "Sh*t"
Jehovah's witness	Let me into your house, and I'll tell you why sh*t happens
Alcoholics anonymous	I trust in my higher power and can accept when sh*t happens
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<i>Psychotherapeutic truths</i>	
Reality therapy	Sh*t Happens
Psychoanalysis	Sh*t happens during the anal phase
Gestalt	You must get your sh*t together now
Object relations	How does it feel to sh*t on me?
Rogerian	You say "Feces occurs"
Behavioural	Sh*t happening is reinforcing
Rational emotive	It is not logical to say "Woe is me" when sh*t happens
Logotherapy	One is always free to sh*t
Existential	Mankind must create meaning when sh*t happens
Systems approach	Stink is a negative feedback when sh*t happens
Support therapy	You sh*t well!
Organismic	Sh*t happens throughout the biosphere
Humanistic	How do you feel about sh*t?
Eclectic	All kinds of sh*t happens

What this eccentric and amusing table illustrates is something, I feel, is important. It is about how individuals and groups have tried to come to terms with the fact that life is not fair and that we need a way of understanding why. Equally, we need to know how best to deal with the vicissitudes of everyday life: to right wrongs, prevent injustice, cruelty and evil: that is doing something, anything, about it.

In many ways, it is important to understand social justice in a wider context. One such approach that I really appreciated was the recent attempt of Krebs (2008) with his evolutionary account of the acquisition of a sense of justice. He argued that the mechanisms that give rise to a sense of justice evolved to help early humans maximize their gains from cooperative social interactions. A sense of justice encourages group members to distribute resources in fair ways (*distributive justice*), to honour the commitments they make to others (*commutative justice*), to punish cheaters

(*corrective justice*), and to develop effective and co-operative ways of resolving conflicts (*procedural justice*). Thus, we inherit a disposition to react positively to being treated fairly and negatively to being treated unfairly, to pass judgement on those who treat others fairly or unfairly, and to feel obliged to pay others back by rewarding and punishing them appropriately.

“To achieve these goals, people use the tools with which they have been endowed by natural selection, especially language, perspective-taking abilities, and social intelligence. Although it is naïve to expect people to possess a universal sense of justice that consistently disposes them to make fair and impartial decisions that jeopardize their adaptive interests, it is realistic to expect people to be able to counteract one another’s biases in ways that enable them to make fair decisions in contexts in which such decisions advance everyone’s interests in optimal ways” (p. 244).

In this sense, social justice is a very big and important problem with which people have struggled for all time. The question is what psychologists “bring to the table”? And how has the last 30–50 years of Social Justice research made any theoretical or practical headway?

Justice Sensitivity and Justice Research

I have been struck at conferences and reading journals how “philosophically homogenous” researchers (and hence their research) is, in this area. Indeed, I wonder if it is possible that Justice Researchers are attracted to the field because of their particular justice sensitivity? The idea was identified over 35 years ago (Huseman et al., 1987). I consider whole issue of sensitivity to injustice maybe as Freud observed: we study our own problems.

Equity sensitivity is usually classified as relatively stable personality trait, which means that people are supposed to react to just or unjust situations in a consistent way though others have argued it is situation specific (Wijn & van den Bos, 2010). Researchers have determined three different types of justice-sensitive people namely *benevolents*, *equity sensitives*, and *entitleds*. Benevolents are referred to as “*givers*” because they are willing to bestow as much as possible to the people and organizations but are relatively unaffected by unfair treatment. They are prepared to experience personal discrimination, unfairness and injustice for a variety of personal reasons, and unlikely to complain or attempt some recompense. Some religions would strongly approve of this behaviour which is self-sacrificial for the greater good.

The counterparts are entitleds who are also labeled “*takers*”. Their ultimate ambition is to maximize their outcomes. They appear selfish, egocentric and deeply concerned about getting what they can from others. In between, there are “*equity sensitives*” who seek to achieve a balance between input and outcome.

As these different categorizations suggest, there are systematic and predictable behavioural differences between the three types. Benevolents are more likely to tolerate unfair payment, whereas entitleds are more likely to react stronger than benevolents to pay inequities by reducing their job performance (Allen & White,

2002). There are interesting questions about the development of justice sensitivity and how it can be appropriately moderated.

To be clear, there is in this area the older construct of equity sensitivity and the newer construct of justice sensitivity. The focus of equity sensitivity is on the outcome of an allocation—which limits the construct to distributive justice. The focus of justice sensitivity is on the role a person can play in any incidence of injustice. A person can be the victim of injustice (victim sensitivity), the observer of injustice (observer sensitivity), the beneficiary of injustice (beneficiary sensitivity), and the perpetrator of injustice (perpetrator sensitivity). Thus, the concept of justice is not limited to distributive justice in the justice sensitivity construct but includes all kinds of injustice (distributive, procedural, retributive, restorative, interactive, legal).

Another important difference is the assumed dimensionality. The justice sensitivity construct conceptualizes all facets (victim, observer, beneficiary, perpetrator) as potentially independent components (a person can be victim sensitive and beneficiary sensitive). By contrast, equity sensitivity is one-dimensional construct (a benevolent person cannot be entitled). These differences have important implications on measurement and research on developmental origins, behavioural outcomes, and correlations (with personality traits, for example). Justice sensitivity research has shown that all facets have some uniqueness which means that they overlap only partially and that they have unique relations with other variables. Yet all studies show a systematic pattern of overlap among the facets. Observer-, beneficiary-, and perpetrator sensitivity correlate highly among each other and seem to reflect a genuine concern for justice for others. Victim sensitivity correlates only moderately with the other factors.

I wondered, however, given the above ideas, that it maybe possible to divide researchers themselves into three categories: justice/equity sensitive, justice/equity indifferent, justice/equity accepting. The *first* category would be people eager to perceive, understand and, more importantly, redress or reduce injustice anywhere they see it. Of course, they may be much more sensitive to injustice in certain areas (education, health, work) and more or less personally committed to various forms of action. Essentially, they “filter” a great deal of the world, through a justice lens. Thus, they would be attracted to social justice research and probably be very homogenous in terms of their socio-political outlook. Perhaps younger researchers have a keener—and different—sense(s) of injustice at being left behind, than do say older researchers. But they are fellow-travellers and attracted to social justice research as a way of partly creating it.

Second, there are those who understand the concept of justice and injustice, but it is less important to them than a whole range of other activities and issues. They do not go out of their way to consider and possibly rectify issues of injustice. In this sense, they are relatively indifferent to justice issues and would not be particularly interested in research in the area. They would be a very heterogeneous group. This may be the case unless and until some injustice affects them, or they are affected by injustices (and material hardships, etc.) in their earlier life.

Third, there are those who are accepting of the “vicissitudes of life”, seeing most injustices perhaps as normal and a consequence of the human condition about which

little can, or should, be done. “Life is not fair: get used to it”. There are all sorts of reasons why this occurs, many of which are difficult if not impossible to redress. Their basic philosophy is: You are “dealt-a-hand” in life; you cannot choose your parents; sh*t happens. The best strategy is not to be obsessed by some retribution but rather learn to cope and exploit what you have been given. They would therefore be less interested in social justice research and in devising strategies to increase it.

Inevitably, these various “types” may hold highly negative views about the other which can be most clearly seen in political debate. Thus, the justice accepting may view the justice sensitive as impractical, “bleeding-heart” liberals whose attempts at rectifying justice are ineffective, misplaced and indeed morally wrong. On the other hand, the justice sensitive may view the justice accepting as callous, unethical and morally corrupt. It could be argued that awareness and mutual understanding is the key to solve these justice dilemmas between justice “types”.

The question for research is this. *Do the personal views on justice-injustice and equity-equality of researchers bias their hypotheses, methods and conclusions? Do they design studies to attempt to provide evidence for their particular theories and neglect, ignore and “pooh-pooh” those who take an opposite perspective? Are too many Social Justice researchers disinterested enough to do good work?*

Believing the World is Just

My “way-into” this area was initially through the *Just World* literature. I read Lerner’s (1980) book while doing my doctorate and was completely hooked. My first study was on the BJW and attitudes to poverty (Furnham & Gunter, 1984), while the second was a cross-cultural study comparing BJWs in a very unjust society, namely South Africa, with one arguably more just, namely Great Britain (Furnham, 1985). I worked on the topic for years (Furnham, 1991, 1992, 1995, 1998). I later published two reviews (Furnham, 2003; Furnham & Procter, 1989). I went to conferences in America and Germany and met many of the top scholars in the field. It was, and still is, a comparatively small group dominated by Canadians and Germans. The field is flourishing and expanding (Bartholomaeus & Strelan, 2019);

A lot of the early work seemed to suggest that those who believed the world was essentially a just place were both naïve and bad because, in order to sustain their BJW, they derogated “innocent victims”. Still today this expanding and voluminous literature seems to focus on the “evil and naïve consequences” of a BJW. Thus, it is argued, it is patently obvious, the world is not just and people who believe it is are deluded and often victim-blamers in their attempt to justify their naïve beliefs.

In an early paper, I made some distinction between those who felt the world was *just* (people got what they deserved), *unjust* (the good and virtuous were punished) and the *a-just or random* world where just deeds were randomly rewarded and punished. We also distinguished between three other worlds: the personal, interpersonal and social world (Furnham & Procter, 1992). I thought the early work and early measure too simple, “scatter-gun”, and naïve. It seemed to me that people could believe in different worlds for different reasons. I might believe the political and economic world unjust; but the world of personal relations just. But most of all, I personally felt the world was

a-just. It rains on the just and unjust alike (Matthew 5). However, some would argue that what is, is not necessarily what it could be, that is made fairer.

But much more importantly, I felt it was personally much more disadvantageous to believe the world was unjust as opposed to just. Imagine believing good actions were punished as opposed to rewarded: good people are assassinated, while dictators live to an old age. A major development at the turn of the millennium was to view the BJW as a *healthy* coping mechanism rather than being the manifestation of anti-social beliefs and prejudice (Dalbert, 2001; Furnham, 2003). There was a subtle movement from focusing on victim derogation to positive coping. Studies have portrayed BJW beliefs as a personal resource or coping strategy, which buffers against stress and enhances achievement behaviour. Of course, as pointed out above one could believe in a just personal world, an a-just interpersonal world and an unjust political world at the same time. Further, there must be degrees in which the world is just or unjust: not simply a stark binary option.

For the first time, BJW beliefs were seen as an indicator of mental health and planning. This does not contradict the more extensive literature on BJW and victim derogation. Rather it helps explain why people are so eager to maintain their beliefs which may be their major coping strategy. BJW is clearly functional for the individual. Rather than despise people for believing the world is (relatively) just, which certainly we teach our children, the BJW may be seen as a fundamental, cognitive coping strategy. However, the directionality is not always clear: Do mentally healthy people believe the world is just, or do just world believers deal better with the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”. Or indeed is there actually a reciprocal causal relationship. Believing the world is just when it is not may be a maladaptive bruising experience.

One question is how BJW is related to other coping strategies and which are favoured by healthy individuals who have low BJW beliefs. Again, the focus is on how BJW relate to personal experiences rather than that of others. I believe from personal experience that “what goes around, comes around”, that for the most part good deeds are rewarded and vice versa. That—the bad are punished and the good rewarded—is what we teach our children, though we no doubt all believe this simple observation needs to be caveated and explained (Baier et al., 2013).

Two Neglected Areas

I have a very wide range of research interest and believe, as noted above SJ researchers have become rather narrow. Two such areas illustrate my point.

The Problem of Evil (Theodicy)

Theodicy is an explanatory concept, and term used by scholars, to illustrate the ways in which people try to find meaning in injustice and the suffering that results. Why does God allow evil things to occur (Blumenthal, 1993; Chester, 1998; Parro, 2021; Tinker, 2009). It is also known as the “Problem of Evil”, (PoE), which is most relevant to those who believe in an omnipotent, omniscient and omni-present deity and

attempting to reconcile the observation that “bad things happen to good people” (Furnham & Brown, 1992). Furnham and Robinson (2023) some have talked about the problems of evil, sceptical theism and the like (Church et al., 2021). It is all about injustice in the world.

The PoE is an enormous problem for believers in a Just God: one of peace, love and justice. Why does he allow injustice in the world?

Some suggest that suffering from various forms of injustice, including social justice, can be mitigated or partly overcome by understanding why an individual found themselves in a particular negative situation. Theologians have distinguished between moral evil, caused by human agency, and various natural evils.

Clearly, mono-theistic and pan-theistic religions favour predominantly different solutions and explanations though some, like the doctrine of karma (behaviour in a previous life), are specific to particular religions. Why this is an interesting and neglected literature is because it examines how people “deal with” obvious, inexplicable and outrageous injustice in the world. How and why does a loving, all-powerful God allow such cruelty and injustice to occur? Indeed is injustice sent by God to test us?

I wonder how many SJ researchers are believers and how they have resolved the problem?

Indifference to, and Coping with, Social Injustice: Stoicism

Given that we are all, at some time another “victims” of injustice, what is the best way we can cope with it. Is it better to attempt to ignore or downplay the issue or confront it? Life is not fair: get used to it.

The denial and suppression of emotion is at the heart of the modern, and ancient, concept of stoicism and fortitude. It has been associated with many different religions and investigated as a potentially adaptive coping style (Pathak et al., 2017).

The stoics believed that being indifferent to pain and pleasure and exercising emotional self-control were the best routes to happiness. Stoicism as a philosophy and a coping style has not appeared directly in psychology, though similar ideas have appeared like repression, suppression, detachment, fortitude and toxic-avoidant coping. Furthermore, whilst the classic interpretation of stoicism is as a healthy and desirable worldview and coping mechanism, the related psychological concepts have nearly always been seen as being maladaptive (Moore et al, 2013). It has also been dismissed as a pathological, masculine, “Big boys don’t cry” maladaptive coping mechanism, related to many poor health outcomes.

The concept of stoicism is not dissimilar to that of repression, although the former seems overall more a functional—and the latter a more dysfunctional—coping strategy. More importantly, stoicism involves the suppression of both pleasure and suffering, whereas repression seems more concerned with the repression of only negative emotions. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether stoicism as a coping strategy is psychologically adaptive or maladaptive. Repression is often confused with suppression, another type of defence mechanism. Whereas repression involves unconsciously blocking unwanted thoughts or impulses, suppression is conscious

and voluntary, i.e. suppression represents a deliberate attempt to forget or not think about painful or unwanted thoughts.

So, my idea is that Social Justice researchers have neglected the clinical literature on personal and effective ways in which people attempt to deal with injustice (Pargament, 2011).

Advice to Young Scholars

There will never be a shortage of areas in which to explore concepts of justice. Current concerns include climate change, sex roles, retribution from slavery, the new world of work, etc. It would not be difficult to apply theories and measures to these areas and establish one's academic research reputation. In doing so, new "topic-specific" measures may be constructed, new mini-theories developed and the field both consolidated and expanded. Plus, the world could actually be changed.

I have three worries and advice for young scholars who choose to take this path:

First, that the social justice literature gets too cut off from the mainstream. Researchers publish in specialist journals and go to specialist conferences. As noted above, social justice touches many disciplines and it is important to "keep up" with changes in the field. Do SJ researchers take into consideration changes in evolutionary psychology, neuro-psychology and cyber-psychology to make sure they are "with the project"? I think for too long evolutionary perspectives have been ignored. It is never good turn inward, particularly with such an interesting, important and multidimensional research agenda. Specialism is often, paradoxically, the enemy of progress.

Second, that the ideology of researchers too frequently permeates their research. It was R. S. Peters who observed that "*patient passive presuppositionless enquiry is a methodological myth*". Are too many researchers coming to the research with a particular set of biases? Too eager perhaps to see injustice; too eager to "right-wrongs"; too angry to be sufficiently disinterested? It seems that most researchers in this area share a number of socio-political assumptions which means they are not confronted sufficiently to defend them. Politically left-wing, easily offended, depression-prone? An obsession with injustice and super-justice-sensitivity and a deep desire to right-wrongs is unlikely to lead to personal happiness or fulfillment? Perhaps, as noted above, it is often socio-political concerns that get people into the field.

Third, that the "objects/issues" of injustice become too wide. As noted about the theodicy literature suggests that there are three "grand attributions" for evil/injustice/unfairness: the will of (a) God; bad luck/chance/fate; and (deliberate) human actions. The ever growing and passionate debate about climate change illustrates this point well. To what extent is global warming a natural occurring phenomenon and what due to human behaviour: or is that climate denial. Do too many justice researchers want to see the causes of bad things in human behaviour because they can be changed. "Life is not fair: Do something about it".

Conclusion

So, to briefly answer the questions I was asked

“What do you think about the current state of social justice scholarship?”

I am not sure it has progressed a great deal over the last decade: Are there new theories, methods, insights? Can neuro-science help? I am not sure and wish the field the best.

Where do you think it is, and should be heading? Is it going in the right direction?”

I think SJ researchers should integrate themselves more in the mainstream. I have made the point about being inward looking. There are imaginative evolutionary theories of justice and I wonder what neuro-science has to offer as well as devising new, non-self-report measures of SJ.

What advice would you give a young justice scholar? What would you like the current generation of young justice scholars to spend their time and talents on?”

SJ research is multi-disciplinary which is often a serious challenge as the different disciplines have very different research priorities. If I were a young scholar, I think I would have three interests: *first*, individual differences in conceiving of, and reacting to justice and injustice and devising new measures of those differences; *second*, looking at cross-cultural differences in the understanding of SJ particularly in ideas about the cause, and repair of injustice; *third*, studying those social groups who are often extremists and who are concerned about very specific areas of injustice like climate change, sex roles and wealth distribution.

Too much research on social justice is about social *injustice*. It is too easy for scholars to become somewhat myopic because of their specialism. New journals and societies are founded to cater for this and often those who join and publish spend too much time talking to each other. People appear to be attracted to the area particularly because of their own values and beliefs. This is called ASA theory: Attraction-Selection-Attrition. Indeed, some see their research as a personal quest and may as a consequence become insufficiently disinterested to do good research.

So...

Life is not fair. Perhaps researchers should concentrate more on helping people accept this self-evident truth? As St Francis has been reputed to say “Lord, grant me the strength to change the things I can, the serenity to deal with the things I cannot change, and the wisdom to know the difference”? Or, as one of my “critical friends”

preferred to conclude: So we can and should change what can be changed, which is much of what happens and will.

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