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978-1-107-00233-3 - Justice and Self-Interest: Two Fundamental Motives

Melvin J. Lerner and Susan Clayton

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JUSTICE AND SELF-INTEREST

This volume argues that the commitment to justice is a fundamental motive and that, although it is typically portrayed as serving self-interest, it sometimes takes priority over self-interest. To make this case, the authors discuss the way justice emerges as a personal contract in children's development; review a wide range of research studying the influences of the justice motive on evaluative, emotional, and behavioral responses; and detail common experiences that illustrate the impact of the justice motive. Through an extensive critique of the research on which some alternative models of justice are based, the authors present a model that describes the ways in which motives of justice and self-interest are integrated in people's lives. They close with a discussion of some positive and negative consequences of the commitment to justice.

Melvin J. Lerner is Distinguished Professor Emeritus in the Department of Psychology of the University of Waterloo, where he founded the Division of Social Psychology. The majority of his research efforts focus on the theme of justice in people's lives. Much of that research has been summarized in several volumes, beginning with *Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion* (1980), which was awarded the Quinquennial Prize from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, and continuing in several coedited volumes: with S. Lerner, *The Justice Motive in Social Behavior: Adapting to Times of Scarcity and Change* (1981); with Gerold Mikula, *Entitlement and the Affectional Bond* (1994); and with Leo Montada, *Responses to Victimitizations and Belief in a Just World* (1998) and *Current Societal Concerns about Justice* (1996). In addition, Lerner is the founding editor of the journal *Social Justice Research* and was the corecipient of a Max-Planck-Forschungspreis and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Society for Justice Research.

Susan Clayton is Whitmore-Williams Professor of Psychology and Chair of Environmental Studies at the College of Wooster. She has published extensively on topics related to justice as well as the natural environment. With Faye Crosby, she wrote *Justice, Gender, and Affirmative Action* (1992), which received an award from the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Human Rights in the United States, and with Susan Opatow, she coedited a volume of the *Journal of Social Issues* on "Green Justice" as well as *Identity and the Natural Environment* (2003). She is also the coauthor (with Gene Myers) of *Conservation Psychology: Understanding and Promoting Human Care for Nature* (2009). Clayton is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and has served as president of the Society for Population and Environmental Psychology.

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TWO FUNDAMENTAL MOTIVES

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PREFACE

The 1980 monograph *Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion* concluded with a “last thought.” It contained the following recommendations concerning what should happen next:

Much remains to be done. As scientists and people who care about one another we need to understand more about the social psychological processes which generate this commitment to deserving and justice. Why do people care about justice? This concern is ultimately tied to the need to solve the riddle of what decides the particular form that justice takes in a given situation. At times, people feel that justice is served when people’s needs are most effectively met; at other times, people’s deserving is seen as relative to their effort, their contributions to a task, their station in life, [or] what they can win in a fair competition (Lerner, 1975). And both of these sets of problems are inextricably bound up with the way people decide who is in their “world,” and what place they have in that world. (Lerner, 1980, p. 194)

The present monograph reviews the contributions of many investigators over the past thirty years in order to provide answers to those centrally important questions. Consistent with the style adopted in the earlier volume, we generated a narrative that provides the reader with our thoughts as we examined a wide range of theories and data. Much of this narrative consists of critical analyses and arguments for rejecting and reinterpreting entire lines of research as well as the theories that generated them.

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In order to integrate the relevant material needed to provide answers to the central questions of the origins of people's commitment to justice and the forms that it takes, it was necessary to detail the way in which much of what had been published in the most prestigious journals and monographs was irrelevant or just plain wrong. In our review of the research, some of the most visible and active areas of contemporary research were found wanting, at best. That includes much of what has been published under the rubric of economic psychology, procedural justice data and theories, evolutionary theories, and infrahuman data, and an array of experiments employing simulations and vignettes that generate misleading conclusions.

Fortunately, and happily, several among the most recent generations of investigators produced sufficient, ingeniously generated experimental findings to enable us to piece together an outline not only of the origins of the justice motive but also of how justice and self-interest interact in people's lives: an initial stage of automatic preconscious processes including justice and self-conceited scripts, and the personal contract, is followed by a second stage in which norm-based motives tend to dominate, and then by a third stage in which people often react in terms of "prepared solutions" to the often-conflicting demands of justice and self-interest.

It has been a long time, and an often bumpy journey, but we feel this volume integrates an extensive array of studies to represent a worthwhile advance in our understanding. We may not have presented the last word about the origins and forms of justice and how they interact with other, self-interested motives, but as some of our discussion of important real-world problems reveals, we know a great deal more about how the justice motive appears in people's lives than we did in 1980. There is even more reason to believe now that justice is a central and pervasive motive. Recognizing the importance of the justice motive, and the various circumstances and forms in which it influences people's lives, offers the opportunity to avoid many tragic events and promises constructive solutions to important problems.