

Title

Belief in a corrupt world: A cross-cultural mediation model of beliefs about justice, punishment, and corruption

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Abstract

Psychological research on the relationship between corruption and belief in a just world (BJW) is lacking and often reports conflicting results. The present study sought to advance this line of research by examining the mediating role of perceptions of punishment in the relationship between corruption and BJW across countries with different corruption levels (i.e., Brazil, United States, and The Netherlands). Six hundred and fifty-four participants completed measures of global BJW, personal BJW, perceived punishment, and perceived corruption. The results showed no evidence for a direct relationship between global BJW and corruption. Personal BJW was directly related to corruption, but only in the Brazilian sample. Additionally, it was found that perceived punishment mediated the relationship of both BJW dimensions with perceived corruption. Overall, these findings indicate that perceived punishment is an important mediator of the relationship between BJW and perceived corruption. Importantly, this study highlights that the macro-level context is an important factor in the mediation. Theoretical and practical implications of the results are discussed in relation to dispositional predictors of corruption.

Keywords: Perceived Corruption; Belief in a Just World; Perceived Punishment

1.Introduction

Corruption is a pervasive issue faced by numerous countries at different times (Tanzi, 1998), with severe negative implications for social, economic, and political factors (Azfar, Lee, & Swamy, 2001; Enste & Heldman, 2017). Despite the importance of this phenomenon, it has not yet been thoroughly examined within social psychology (Zaloznaya, 2014) and previous studies have presented contradictory results. One area implicated in some conflicting results concerns the relationship between belief in a just world (BJW) and perceived corruption.

Elucidating the relationship between beliefs about justice and corruption is an important endeavor for developing strategies focused on the prevention of corruption. This relationship has been examined by a few recent studies (Bai et al., 2014; Stupnianeck & Navichas, 2019), although none of these studies analyzed the potential effects that the cultural context may have on the relationship between BJW and corruption. Considering that corruption is affected by social and cultural circumstances (Modesto & Pilati, 2020), variation in those factors could have a significant influence on the direct and indirect effects of BJW on perceived corruption.

The present study aimed to test the moderating effect of culture on the mediation of the BJW- perceived corruption link by perceived punishment. We aimed to replicate and extend Bai et al. (2014, Study 1) by examining other cultural contexts and testing mediating variables. Importantly, the selection of the countries was based on differences in indices of perceived corruption, which has been used as a strategy to compare corruption across nations (Transparency International, 2019).

1.1 Corruption

Corruption is commonly defined as the abuse of power for private gains (Transparency International, 2019). Despite some criticisms (Andersson & Heywood, 2009), this definition continues to be used by academics and organizations dedicated to preventing and combating corruption. More specifically, two aspects of this definition are relevant to psychological research: potential confusions with correlated terms and difficulties in operationalizing the construct (Modesto & Pilati, 2020).

Concerning the terminological issue, it is common for the concept of corruption to be used as a synonym for dishonest behavior and unethical behavior. It can be argued that unethical behavior should be understood as the broader of the terms (Modesto & Pilati, 2020). Treviño, Weaver, and Reynolds (2006) define it as a behavior that violates the moral norms of a certain group. Dishonesty could then be considered a subtype of unethical behavior (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010) which tends to involve, in addition to violation of moral rules, the analysis of expected gains (Scott & Jehn, 1999). Therefore, dishonesty implies a personal gain from the unethical behavior in question. Corruption should then be understood as a more specific dimension of dishonesty, given that it not only involves a violation of rules and an expectation of gains, but also includes abuse of power (Modesto & Pilati, 2020).

Further from the terminological issue, operationalizing corrupt behavior is challenging given that one must consider rule violation, potential gains, as well as abuse of power. Given the issues in operationalizing corrupt behavior, many studies and national statistics have systematically adopted the use of measures of perceived corruption, rather than objective measures of behavior (Judge, McNatt, & Xu, 2011). In fact, measures of perceived corruption have been the strategy used by Transparency International to create a ranking of countries on their level's corruption.

Despite being commonly used, perceived-corruption measures do not always comprise more objective corruption indices (Olken, 2009), which indicates potential limitations for this type of measure. Furthermore, actual and perceived corruption can have different predictors (Belousova, Goel, & Korhonen, 2016). Nevertheless, assessing perceived corruption is important for examining a variety of related negative consequences, such as the nurturing of a culture of suspicion which tends to be associated with other corruption indices (Melgar, Rossi, & Smith, 2010). Additionally, perceived corruption interferes with engagement in anticorruption actions (Peiffer & Alvarez, 2016), pointing to the importance of perceived corruption for understanding and intervening in corruption.

1.2 Belief in a just world and corruption

In order to better understand perceived corruption, one must consider perceptions of justice, a concept associated with the Just World Theory (Lerner, 1980). According to this theory, some individuals may have a belief that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (i.e., Belief in a Just World). Traditionally, it has been understood that BJW can be expressed through two dimensions: a global and a personal dimension. Global BJW refers to beliefs about justice for people in general, while the personal dimension concerns beliefs about justice for one's self (Dalbert, 1999; Lipkus, 1991; Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996; Modesto, Figueredo, Gama, Rodrigues, & Pilati, 2017). According to Lipkus et al. (2016), this distinction is fundamental to the understanding of BJW given that evaluations of justice focused on the self or focused on others have different underlying mechanisms (an example is the self-serving bias; Miller & Ross, 1975). That distinction is not only conceptual as some evidence suggests that global and personal BJW predict different phenomena (Bègue &

Bastounis, 2003; Testé & Perrin, 2013), with the personal dimension predicting self-relevant phenomena (i.e., behavioral intentions) and the global dimension predicting judgments of other individuals (i.e., perceptions regarding other individuals' behaviors) (Stupnianeck & Navickas, 2019).

BJW is a multifaceted construct. On the one hand, BJW can be manifested via a controlled evaluation, usually inferred through responses to questions regarding beliefs about justice (Hafer, 2000; Lerner & Goldberg, 1999). On the other hand, BJW is also manifested automatically via proceduralized behaviors regarding social judgment, which can be assessed using implicit attitude measurements (Modesto & Pilati, 2015). In terms of predictive validity, numerous studies have demonstrated that BJW is related to deviant behaviors (Correia & Dalbert, 2008; Donat, Dalbert, & Kamble, 2014; Sutton & Winnard, 2007) such as corruption (Bai et al., 2014; Bai, Liu, & Kou, 2016; Stupnianeck & Navickas, 2019) and dishonesty (Wenzel, Schindler, & Reinhard, 2017).

In a set of studies on perceived corruption in China, Bai et al. (2014) found that perceived punishment mediates the relationship between BJW and perceived corruption. In general, individuals who believe that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (high endorsement of BJW), tend to believe that people who show corrupt behaviors will be punished (perceived punishment), thereby reducing their perceived corruption. Further support for this mediation model was also found on studies of corruption intention (Bai et al., 2016). A noteworthy result in those studies is that the global dimension of BJW predicted perceived corruption of other individuals (Bai et al., 2014) while the personal dimension predicted one's own perceived corruption (Bai et al., 2016), highlighting the importance of differentiating the two dimensions of BJW.

A similar pattern of results was found in a study conducted in Lithuania (Stupnianeck & Navickas, 2019). In that study, participants were asked to report how

much money they had spent on bribes in the last five years. It was found that the personal dimension of BJW (but not the global dimension) had a negative association with bribery. Their findings replicate Bai et al.'s (2016) results in personal BJW and corruption.

However, different results were found in a study of dishonest behavior (Wenzel et al., 2017). Using the coin-flipping paradigm (Rosenbaum, Billinger, & Stieglitz, 2014), Wenzel et al. (2017) identified a positive relationship between personal (but not global) BJW and dishonesty among North American participants. Therefore, in contrast to the studies on corruption, global (but not personal) BJW predicted individual's unethical behaviors. Furthermore, in contrast to Bai et al.'s (2014) study, Wenzel et al. (2017) observed a positive effect of global BJW on dishonesty.

Even though research on the effects of justice beliefs on corruption has advanced, there are still many questions and gaps that remain unaddressed. More specifically, the potential impact of situational factors has not yet been fully examined. As argued by Modesto and Pilati (2020), corruption is a phenomenon that has multiple components originating from different levels of analysis. One particularly important level of analysis is the macro-level, which aggregates factors related to the political, social, and cultural norms regarding corruption. We, therefore, consider that macro-level factors are crucial for understanding how the corruption-BJW link occurs. As a comparison on the macro-level, we analyzed a widely used indicator in the corruption literature: the index of perceived corruption (Transparency International, 2019). That way, we can select countries with different profiles and characteristics, which allows for testing Bai et al.'s model in different cultural contexts.

In the present study, we compare three distinct samples recruited from Brazil, US, and The Netherlands. According to data from the Transparency International (2020),

China (the country in which Bai et al. conducted their research) was ranked 80th place in perceived corruption, with a score of 41 (on a scale ranging from 0 to 100). Brazil was in the 106th place scoring 35. The US was in 23rd place with 69 points and The Netherlands in 8th with 82 points. Thus, we can analyze a context (Brazil) that presents more elevated indices of corruption than China and compare it to two other contexts (US and The Netherlands) with lower levels of corruption, one of them being in the top 10 lowest corruption countries according to that ranking (Transparency International, 2020).

The reviewed literature presents incongruent findings regarding the effect of the BJW dimensions on corruption and dishonesty. Using different measures, negative association with the global and personal dimensions were found (measures of perceived and intended corruption, and retrospective reports) as well as a positive association with the global dimension (dishonest behavior). One way of understanding diverging results comes from the proposal of a contextualized social psychology (Pettigrew, 2018), in which social and psychological phenomena are understood to vary according to the context. To the best of our knowledge, a cross-cultural comparison of the effects of BJW on corruption has not been conducted. The present study aims to fill that gap by examining the associations between BJW and perceived corruption in countries with differing levels of corruption.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Six hundred and fifty-four college students participated in our study. The mean participant age was similar across countries: $M_{Brazil} = 22.99$ ($SD = 6.24$), $M_{Netherlands} = 19.73$ ($SD = 1.54$), $M_{USA} = 19.35$ ($SD = 1.33$). Furthermore, participants were mostly

female in all three countries: $Female_{Brazil} = 67\%$, $Female_{Netherlands} = 80\%$, $Female_{USA} = 90\%$. Out of all the participants, 34% were from Brazil, 34% were from the United States, and 32% were from The Netherlands.

2.2 Measures

Scenarios. Three scenarios were translated and adapted from Bai et al. (2014), describing bribery episodes (i.e., getting a contract through a government bid, avoiding traffic tickets, and receiving academic funding). The scenarios were translated and back-translated by two independent fluent English speakers, to ensure consistency and cultural meaning across the different samples. Both translators agreed with the final results of the adaption process. Typical names from each country were used. After translation, the scenarios were analyzed by independent examiners to evaluate whether they represented typical bribery episodes in each cultural context. After the judges' evaluation and conducting pre-tests, the scenarios were found to be suitable in all cultural contexts. An example of scenario of government bidding is as follows:

Imagine that James is the director in charge of bidding. Company X is in a disadvantaged position compared with other bidders. To secure the bidding, the CEO of Company X asked James to help his company and promised to give James some money privately if his company wins the bid. James knows that helping him to win the bid by taking the money is an illegal act.

Perceived corruption. A measure of perceived corruption was also adapted from Bai et al. (2014). After reading the scenario, participants estimated the probability that the person would accept the bribe on a scale ranging from 1 (*definitely not*) to 9 (*definitely would*). A measure of perceived corruption was created by averaging the participants' responses to the three scenarios. The resulting measure had a Cronbach alpha value of $\alpha = .82$ for the Brazil sample, $\alpha = .69$ for the United States sample and $\alpha = .73$ for the Netherlands sample.

Perceived punishment. A measure of perceived punishment was also adapted from Bai et al. (2014) and consisted of a rating of the probability of the person being punished if they accepted the bribe, rated on a scale from 1 (*definitely not punished*) to 9 (*definitely punished*). This measure was also averaged across the three scenarios (Brazil: $\alpha = .83$; United States: $\alpha = .67$; and The Netherlands: $\alpha = .70$).

Global BJW (GBJW). The Global Scale of Belief in a Just World (Lipkus et al., 1996) consists of 7 items that evaluate beliefs about justice concerning other individuals and the world in general (e.g., I basically think the world is a just place). Each item is answered on a 6-point scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 6 (*totally agree*). The internal consistency was satisfactory for the samples in Brazil ($\alpha = .81$), United States ($\alpha = .84$) and the Netherlands ($\alpha = .86$).

Personal BJW (PBJW). A scale adapted from Dalbert (1999) was used to measure personal dimensions of BJW. This instrument consists of 7 items answered on a scale ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 6 (*totally agree*). Internal consistency was satisfactory in all samples (Brazil $\alpha = .80$; USA $\alpha = .86$; The Netherlands $\alpha = .83$).

2.3 Procedure

Participant recruitment was conducted online for all samples. Participants first completed the global and personal BJW measures, then each scenario with the assessments of perceived corruption and punishment. The study protocol was evaluated by the first author of Bai et al. (2014), who confirmed the consistency in the procedure.

In the analysis plan we aimed to conduct a moderated mediation test (Hayes, 2013) using model 59 of PROCESS on SPSS. All variables were standardized before the analyses. The moderated mediation model is represented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1

3. Results

As shown in Table 1, Brazil had a higher level of corruption perception than the USA and The Netherlands. No significant differences were observed on perceived corruption between the USA and The Netherlands. Regarding perception of punishment, USA and The Netherlands showed higher scores than Brazil, and the USA was statistically higher than The Netherlands. These mean comparisons indicate that there are different patterns of punishment expectations between participants of the different countries. This pattern of results is also consistent with the international ranking of corruption perception (Transparency International, 2019).

Insert Table 1

In the first step of our main analysis, a moderated mediation model with GBJW as the antecedent variable. We found a positive association for path A (see Figure 1) ($B = .41, p < .001$), which indicates that higher levels of global BJW are associated with higher levels of perceived punishment. Additionally, we identified a negative association for path B ($B = -.58, p < .001$), which suggests that higher levels of perceived punishment are associated with lower levels of perceived corruption. We did not find a significant association for path C ($B = -.05, p = .58$), which indicates that global BJW did not influence perceived corruption, unlike what was found by Bai et al. (2014). Furthermore, we found no evidence that country moderates the effects in any of the paths (A, B, and C), indicating that the mediation model is robust across the countries we analyzed. The statistical parameters for the moderated mediation models are shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2

The same analytical procedure used for examining GBJW was applied to test the mediation model with PBJW as the antecedent variable. Similarly, to what was found for GBJW, higher levels of PBJW were associated with more perceived punishment (path A: $B = .23, p = .013$), which was associated with more perceived corruption (path B: $B = -.53, p < .001$). However, in contrast to Bai et al.'s (2014), the personal dimension of BJW had a positive relationship with perceived corruption (path C: $B = -.27, p = .002$) (see Table 3). Regarding differences between countries, there was a significant interaction between country and PBJW on perceived corruption ($B = .12, p = .005$), indicating an effect of context on the model proposed by Bai et al. (2014).

Insert Table 3

Analyzing each country separately, we found that the effect of PBJW on perceived corruption was significant in Brazil [$B = -.18, t(218) = -2.82, p = .005$], but not in the US [$B = -.04, t(218) = -.70, p = .487$] nor The Netherlands [$B = .03, t(212) = .44, p = .661$].

4. Discussion

The present research aimed to examine the effect of cultural context on perceived corruption in the association between BJW, perceived punishment, and perceived corruption. Samples were obtained from three different countries that vary in their perception of corruption levels according to the Transparency International (2020)

ranking. Bai et al. (2014), who tested the same model in China, observed that global B JW exerted a negative effect on perceived corruption, an effect which was mediated by perceived punishment.

Our findings indicate that the association between GBJW and perceived corruption is mediated by perceived punishment, and that country does not interfere in that association. The findings also indicate that there is a negative and direct association between PBJW, perceived corruption, and perceived punishment. Furthermore, there were significant differences between countries in perceived corruption that corroborated the ranking used in this study (Transparency International, 2020). We also observed a significant difference between countries on perceived punishment, which is relevant for the understanding of the differences observed in the mediation model across the countries.

We did not replicate some of the findings from Bai et al. (2014) in the countries we tested. Despite the direct effect of GBJW on perceived corruption found in Bai et al. (2014), that association was not present in any of the three countries examined in the current study. Additionally, we found a direct effect of PBJW on perceived corruption but only in Brazil. As a whole, these results did not corroborate the understanding that GBJW is a significant predictor of perceived corruption, while PBJW is a predictor of corruption intention and behaviors (Bai et al., 2016; Stupnianeck & Navickas, 2019), which points to the necessity of examining additional mediators and moderators. Previous studies offered some support for that understanding when reporting an association between GBJW (but not PBJW) and dishonest behavior (Wenzel et al., 2017). It is noteworthy that Brazil, the country with the highest corruption levels out of the studied countries, was the only one to present a direct effect of PBJW on perceived corruption. Some studies have suggested that the expression of B JW is dependent on

social norms (Alves & Correia, 2008). Considering that in Brazil “jeitinho” (“the Brazilian way”; Miura, Pilati, Milfont, Ferreira, & Fischer, 2019) is a cultural norm that could favor a culture of corruption, future studies may explore how social norms associated with corruption could interfere with the effects of BJW dimensions on perceived corruption.

Regarding this relationship, we believe that, considering that corruption is a counter-normative behavior (Modesto & Pilati, 2020), the pro-ethical social norm is what prevails in general. In other words, people know that corruption is not a socially accepted behavior. When the pro-ethical norm prevails, therefore, people’s sense of justice (BJW) is not threatened. If the sense of justice is not threatened, then BJW does not tend to have a direct effect on other phenomena such as victim blaming (Modesto & Pilati, 2017), which seems to also happen in the case of corruption in this cross-cultural comparison. Because Brazil has social norms that favor corruption (e.g. *jeitinho* – Ferreira et al., 2012; Pilati et al., 2011), the participants' sense of justice (BJW) may have been threatened. Once the sense of justice is threatened, BJW will have a direct effect on corruption as a way of restoring justice, with the effect of the social norms being more robust in the personal dimension than in the global dimension of BJW. Social norms about corruption (such as *jeitinho*) can help to understand contradictory relationships concerning the effect of BJW on corruption found in previous studies, as well as the pattern of effects found in this research. However, it is important to note that this is a post-hoc hypothesis that should be tested in future studies.

5. Conclusions

Despite the differences in findings regarding the direct BJW-perceived corruption link, the model proposed by Bai et al. (2014) was corroborated. In their

study, they found a partial mediation for GBJW while we found a full mediation across countries, indicating the robustness of that effect. It is noteworthy that the mediation model also pointed to a relevant role for PBJW. These results indicate that perceived punishment is an important mediator of the BJW-perceived corruption link.

The present research has some limitations. While perceived punishment was identified as a mediator of the association between BJW and perceived corruption, a cost-benefit model of corruption would suggest that additional mediators and moderators are likely to be relevant for understanding corruption phenomena (Modesto & Pilati, 2020). Our results do not offer a comprehensive survey of the potential mediating and moderating variables, which is something that could be addressed in future studies.

The present study contributes to the analysis of dispositional factors in the prediction of corruption, as described in the Analytical Model of Corruption (Modesto & Pilati, 2020). However, as suggested in the model, these results advance our understanding of corruption by analyzing the moderating effect of a contextual factor (i.e., country) exerts over the structural associations of dispositional factors with other relevant variables. We suggest that the contributions of psychology to the study of corruption should aim to understand interactions between multiple antecedent factors in a way that points to the development of effective measures for the prevention of corruption.

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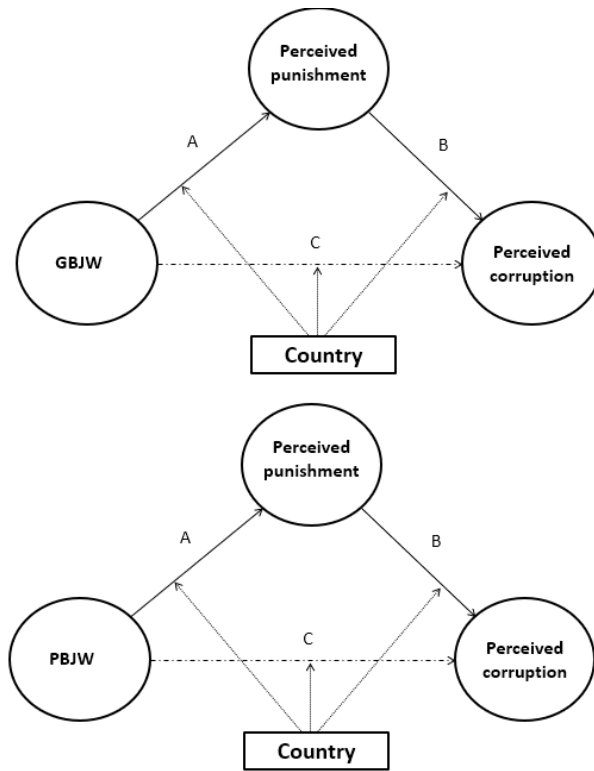


Figure 1 – Moderated mediation model tested in all samples.

Country	Mean difference	Std. Error	Sig	CI 95% LL	CI 95% UL
Corruption					
Brazil - USA	.86	.09	< .001	.64	1.07
- The Netherlands	.75	.09	< .001	.54	.96
USA - The Netherlands	-.10	.09	.70	-.32	.11
Punishment					
Brazil - USA	-1.11	.08	< .001	-1.31	-.91
- The Netherlands	-.84	.08	< .001	-1.04	-.63
USA - The Netherlands	.27	.08	.004	.07	.48

Table 1 – Perceived punishment and corruption by country

Outcome	Model	B	Std. Error	Sig	CI 95% LL	CI 95% UL
Punishment	GBJW	.41	.09	<.001	.23	.59
	Country	.36	.04	<.001	.28	.45
	Int1 (GBJW x Country)	-.06	.04	.15	-.15	.02
R ² = .20						
Corruption	GBJW	-.05	.09	.58	-.23	.13
	Punishment	-.58	.09	<.001	-.77	-.40
	Country	-.18	.04	<.001	-.27	-.10
	Int1 (GBJW x Country)	.04	.04	.34	-.05	.13
	Int2 (Pun x Country)	.08	.04	.10	-.01	.18
R ² = .23						

Table 2 – Statistical parameters of the model with global BJW

Outcome	Model	B	Std. Error	Sig	IC 95% LL	IC 95% UL
Punishment	PBJW	.23	.09	.013	.05	.42
	Country	.38	.05	<.001	.29	.47
	Int1 (PBJW x Country)	-.05	.05	.31	-.14	.05
	R ² = .14					
Corruption	PBJW	-.27	.09	.002	-.44	-.09
	Punishment	-.53	.09	<.001	-.71	-.36
	Country	-.18	.04	<.001	-.27	-.09
	Int1 (PBJW x Country)	.12	.04	.005	.04	.21
	Int2 (Pun x Country)	.07	.05	.15	-.02	.16
R ² = .27						

Table 3 – Statistical parameters for the model with personal BJW