

# Effects of Perspective-Taking on System Justifying Beliefs

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## Introduction

- Adopting the perspective of outgroup members reduces stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000).
- However, research has yet to consider whether focusing on the **positive** or **negative** aspects of a target's life moderates these effects.
- Theories of System Justification (Jost & Banaji, 1994) and Belief in a Just World (Lerner, 1980) suggest that people engage in victim-enhancing and victim-blaming (perceiving others more or less favorably on certain traits) to justify the status quo and to maintain the perception that the world is fair and just.
- We predicted that focusing on the positive or negative aspects of a disadvantaged person's life, via perspective-taking, would increase victim-enhancement and victim-blaming, resulting in less empathy and greater system justifying and just world beliefs.

## Study 1

In Study 1, participants (Ps) wrote about a day in the life of a homeless Black man (see photo below) in one of four ways:

- In the **neutral perspective-taking (PT)** condition, Ps wrote about a day in the life of the target in the first person, imagining themselves as the homeless person.
- In the **positive valence PT** condition, Ps imagined themselves as the homeless person, but focused only on the positive aspects of his life.
- In the **negative valence PT** condition, Ps imagined themselves as the homeless person, but focused only on the negative aspects of his life.
- In the **control condition**, Ps wrote about a day in the life of the homeless person from the third person perspective.



## Hypotheses

1. We predicted that Ps who focused on the **positive** or **negative** aspects of the target's life would report less empathy and greater endorsement of just world and system justifying beliefs than neutral PT and control Ps.
2. Ps in the **neutral PT** condition were expected to report more empathy and less endorsement of just world and system justifying beliefs than control Ps.

## Participants

111 Ps (51 men, 66 women) at the University at Buffalo participated in the study for psychology course credit.

## Method

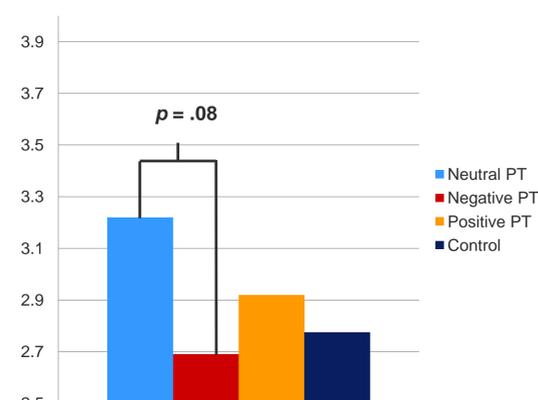
Participants sat at individual cubicles where they first completed the PT task. Next, they completed the following dependent measures on the computer:

- **Empathy Scale** (Batson et al., 1997) (e.g., "How compassionate do you currently feel?")
- **Just World Beliefs Scale** (Rubin & Peplau, 1975) (e.g., "Basically, the world is a just place")
- **System Justification Scale** (Jost & Kay, 2003) (e.g., "The United States is the best country in the world to live in")

## Study 1 Results

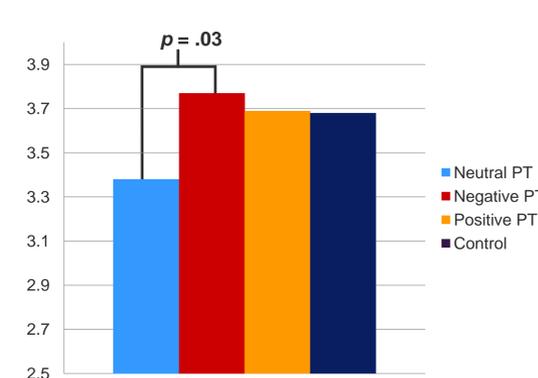
### Empathy

Main effect of condition,  $F(3, 107) = 2.40, p = .07$ .



### Just World Beliefs

Main effect of condition,  $F(3, 107) = 3.18, p = .03$ .



### System Justifying Beliefs

No significant effects were found for system justifying beliefs.

## Discussion

Consistent with predictions, Ps in the **negative PT** condition tended to feel less empathic and reported greater just world beliefs than those in the neutral PT condition.

No other significant differences were found among conditions.

## Study 2

- Although Study 1 showed no effects of positive PT, results suggested a victim-blaming pattern when Ps adopted the target's perspective and focused on the **negative** aspects of his life. To further examine this effect, we assessed ratings of the target in Study 2 and manipulated perceived similarity to the target.

- Specifically, we examined whether manipulating similarity (e.g., sharing the same birthday as the target) would reduce victim-blaming tendencies (i.e., target trait ratings).

- Finally, because research has shown that system justifying beliefs are strengthened following a threat to the system, all Ps in Study 2 first experienced a system threat and then were assigned to the PT and similarity vs. dissimilarity conditions.

## Hypotheses

1. Overall, Ps in the PT conditions will rate the target more favorably compared to the control condition.
2. Overall, Ps in the similarity condition (i.e., shared birthday condition) will rate the target more favorably than those in the dissimilarity condition.
3. These effects may be qualified by a PT x Similarity interaction:
  - Among Ps who engage in **negative PT**, feeling dissimilar to the target (i.e., unshared birthday condition) should lead to less favorable target ratings than feeling similar to the target (i.e., sharing the same birthday).

## Participants

136 Ps (62 men, 74 women) took part in the study for psychology course credit. For the analyses, only Ps in the similar birthday condition who correctly remembered that the target had the same birthday as them were analyzed.

## Method

To activate the system justification motive, all Ps first read a passage describing the American way of life as unfavorable.

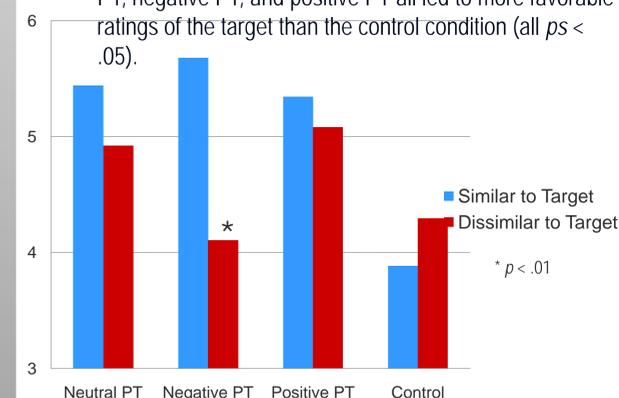
They then saw the photo of the homeless man from Study 1. This time, his name was given ("Tyrone") and his birthday was either the same as or different from the P.

Ps then rated the target on the following traits: intelligent, hardworking, likable, happy, attractive, athletic, honest (e.g., 1 = very unintelligent; 9 = very intelligent,  $\alpha = .83$ ).

## Results

### Trait Ratings

- Significant main effect of PT,  $F(3, 86) = 3.67, p = .02$ .
  - As expected, Ps in the PT conditions rated the target more favorably than those in the control condition.
- Marginal main effect of Similarity,  $F(3, 86) = 3.64, p = .06$ .
  - As expected, Ps in the similarity condition rated the target more favorably than those in the dissimilarity condition.
- These effects were qualified by a significant PT x Similarity interaction,  $F(3, 86) = 2.67, p = .05$  (see graph below).
  - Among Ps in the **negative PT** condition, feeling dissimilar to the target (unshared birthday) led to less favorable ratings of the target than feeling similar to the target (shared birthday).
  - Also, among Ps who felt **dissimilar** to the target, those who engaged in **negative PT** rated the target less favorably than those in the positive PT and neutral PT conditions ( $ps < .05$ ).
  - Among Ps who felt **similar** to the target, neutral PT, negative PT, and positive PT all led to more favorable ratings of the target than the control condition (all  $ps < .05$ ).



## Summary and Conclusions

Ps who adopted the perspective of a homeless person and focused on the negative aspects of his life reported less empathy and stronger just world beliefs (Study 1).

- Extending past research, these results suggest that there may be times when PT actually exacerbates negative perceptions of disadvantaged others.

Study 2 revealed a way to reduce the effects of negative PT.

- Regardless of the valence of perspective taken (neutral, positive, negative), Ps who felt similar to the target (shared birthday condition) rated him more favorably than the control.
- In contrast, among Ps who felt dissimilar to the target (unshared birthday), Ps in the negative PT condition rated him less favorably than in the neutral PT and positive PT conditions.