

NYU Study Shows Diminished Sense of Moral Outrage Key to Maintaining View that World is Fair and Just

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People who see the world as essentially fair can just maintain this perception through a diminished sense of moral outrage, according to a study by researchers in New York University's Department of Psychology. The findings appear in the March issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, which is published by the Association for Psychological Science.

Psychologists have long studied system-justification theory, which posits that people adopt belief systems that justify existing political, economic, and social situations or inequities in order to make themselves feel better about the status quo. Moreover, in order to maintain their perceptions of the world as just, people resist changes that would increase the overall amount of fairness and equality in the system. Instead, they often engage in cognitive adjustments that preserve a distorted image of reality in which existing institutions are seen as more equitable and just than they are.

The NYU research sought to explain how individuals make these cognitive adjustments in maintaining their world view, despite evidence of ongoing social and economic inequality. In the first part of the study—an experiment involving a series of questions and scenarios—the researchers found that the more people endorsed anti-egalitarian beliefs, the less guilt and moral outrage they felt. The reduction in moral outrage (but not guilt) led them to show decreased support for helping the disadvantaged and redistributing resources.

In the second part of the research, the team presented half of the study's subjects with Horatio Alger, rags-to-riches stories, which implicitly endorse system-justification beliefs, and half with stories describing the plight of innocent victims, which underscore the unfairness of the system. The results showed that that subjects exposed to the rags-to-riches stories reported less negative affect and less moral outrage than subjects exposed to the innocent-victim essays. As with the first study, moral outrage mediated the effect of system justification on support for redistribution, but general negative affect did not.

“These results demonstrate both the existence of palliative consequences of ideology and their impact,” said NYU graduate student Cheryl J. Wakslak, the study's lead author. “These results show that people who see the world as essentially fair and just can maintain this perspective if their sense of moral outrage is diminished.”