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Belief in a Just World for Oneself versus Others, Social Goals,
and Subjective Well-Being

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Abstract

The belief in a just world (BJW) affects subjective well-being and social behavior. However, its role in shaping the social goals that underlie behavior has not been investigated. Informed by the bidimensional model of BJW, the present study examined the relations of BJW for the self (BJW-self) versus BJW for other people (BJW-others) with social goals and subjective well-being in a sample of 398 university students. As predicted, BJW-self was positively related to affiliative social goals including nurturance, intimacy, and social development goals. In contrast, BJW-others was positively related to dominance and social demonstration goals. Consistent with the bidimensional model, BJW-self and BJW-others were related to most social goals in opposing directions. The present findings indicate that BJW-self and BJW-others is not only relevant to *how* people act in relation to others, but also *why* they act the way they do.

Keywords: just-world beliefs; social goals; subjective well-being; flourishing; positive and negative affect; future-directed thinking

1. Introduction

1.1. Just-world beliefs

The belief in a just world (BJW) is the conviction that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. According to Lerner's (1980) just-world theory, it arises from an implicit "personal contract" formed when children learn to eschew immediate gratification and to respect moral rules and conventions in return for longer term rewards. Faith in this personal contract gives life a sense of predictability, control, and meaning, and allows people to plan toward their futures with optimism. However, BJW is often challenged by the abundant evidence of undeserved suffering that exists in the world, including illness, poverty, and oppression. The psychological benefits of BJW motivate people to defend it against this evidence, for example, by blaming and derogating innocent victims. In the title of Lerner's (1980) book, BJW was therefore described as a "fundamental delusion": fundamental in the sense that it is crucial for individual functioning, but a delusion in the sense that it is untrue and motivationally defended.

Whereas the first decades of BJW research regarded BJW as unidimensional (e.g., Rubin & Peplau, 1975), researchers later paid attention to different dimensions of the construct, distinguishing the belief that the world is just for the self (BJW-self) from the belief that the world is just for others (BJW-others; Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996; see also Dalbert, 1999). These two dimensions are positively correlated, but have theoretically and empirically distinct functions. Theoretically, BJW-self is linked to faith in the personal contract, and research shows that it is associated with the benefits that one would expect from this faith, including higher subjective well-being (e.g., Sutton & Douglas, 2005), higher levels of prosocial behavior (Bègue, 2014), and lower levels of antisocial behavior (Bai, Liu, & Kou, 2016). Conversely, BJW-others is theoretically and empirically associated with the defense mechanisms identified by just-world theory, such as blame and derogation of innocent victims of misfortune, punitive responses to

offenders, and harsh attitudes to disadvantaged groups (Bègue & Bastounis, 2003).

Underscoring the importance of distinguishing between BJW-self and BJW-others, research has shown that the two dimensions are not only related to different variables, but are also related to the same variables in opposing directions. These opposing relations may only become apparent when each dimension is controlled for the other. For example, BJW-others has been found to be positively related, and BJW-self negatively related, to antisocial behavioral intentions (Sutton & Winnard, 2007), the desire for revenge (Strelan & Sutton, 2011), neuroticism (Bollmann, Krings, Maggiori, & Rossier, 2015), support for harsh punishments of criminals (Bègue & Bastounis, 2003), and pessimism about the fulfillment of one's life goals (Sutton & Winnard, 2007).

1.2. Just-world beliefs and social goals

Most research on BJW examines people's attitudes to past and present circumstances, rather than their goals, plans, and beliefs about the future. Nonetheless, these are of central importance for just-world theory, since faith in the personal contract ought to motivate people to form long term goals, to feel confident in achieving them, and to pursue them using socially legitimate means (Callan, Harvey, & Sutton, 2014; Lerner, 1980). Studies have generally supported this perspective in relation to people's confidence in realizing specific goals such as getting a job, buying a house, or getting married (Nudelman, Otto, & Dalbert, 2016; Sutton & Winnard, 2007). Related studies have shown that people high in BJW (these studies did not differentiate between BJW-self and BJW-others) tend to be more focused on long-term goals (Hafer, 2000). Hafer and Rubel (2015) found this relationship between BJW and long-term focus to hold only among people who, consistent with the personal contract, tend to use pro (vs. anti) social means to pursue their goals.

These findings show that just-world theory has been successful in the important task of

understanding whether human behaviour is focused on short- or long-term goals, and whether it is in keeping with moral norms. However, these dimensions do not capture much of the richness of human behaviour. In their path through life, people may form any number of morally acceptable long-term goals, such as career success or closeness with others, to be a good leader, or to follow good leaders. They may pursue these goals by any number of morally acceptable means – for example, by working hard, or by sacrificing time to build relationships. Their day-to-day and long term decisions are informed by beliefs and desires – abstract representations including knowledge of themselves and the world, and their goals (Allport, 1937). We propose that it may be possible to expand the explanatory and predictive scope of just-world beliefs by examining how they relate to these abstract representations.

Recent research provides examples of this general principle. Bartholomaeus and Strelan (2016) showed that the relationship between BJW and forgiveness can be understood in terms of underlying representations of human nature. Those high in BJW-self tended to believe that people are capable of positive growth, and so were more likely to forgive. Those high in BJW-others tended to believe that a person's character is fixed, and so were less likely to forgive. Lucas, Rudolph, Zhdanova, Barkho and Weidner (2014) showed that believing that others receive outcomes they deserve led Americans to support restriction of immigration because it triggered collective angst – a pessimistic view of the future of their national group.

In the present article, our focus is on the relationships between BJW and social goals. Some social goals define what people want from their relationships, such as closeness (intimacy), caring (nurturance), popularity (status), authority and influence (leadership) and coercive power (dominance). These are known as social content goals, and refer to the aspects of relationships that are important to people (Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996). Other social goals refer to people's reasons to pursue relationships in the first place, and refer not to aspects of

relationships, but to what external benefits might arise from them. Thus, people may pursue relationships in order to improve their social skills and insight (social development), to prove to others (or themselves) that they are personally social competent and successful (demonstration–approach) or that they are *not* socially *in*competent or *un*successful (demonstration–avoidance). These are known as social achievement goals (Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996).

Social goals are correlated with different patterns of behavior and well-being. For example, intimacy, nurturance, and status goals are positively related to social adjustment and relationship satisfaction (Kiefer & Ryan, 2008). In contrast, dominance goals are related to aggressive behaviour, unpopularity and academic underachievement (Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996). Understanding how these general social goals relate to BJW could ultimately lead to a theoretical specification of the behaviours that are associated with BJW, and also the social motivations that link BJW to well-being. Such a theory would be in keeping with the established characterization of goals as located at an intermediate stage between motives and specific action plans, described by Allport (1937) as the “doing” side of personality.

In its original formulation, just-world theory does not describe the relational consequences of just-world beliefs, including the social goals that people pursue. However, theory and research on the bidimensional model of BJW suggest that—since BJW-self fosters the disciplined and morally legitimate pursuit of long term goals—it should also foster the pursuit of affiliative social goals such as intimacy, nurturance, and social development. Conversely, BJW-others motivates people to treat others as they deserve (Bègue & Bastounis, 2003; Sutton & Winnard, 2007) and so may make powerful and prestigious positions attractive because they enable the distribution of rewards and punishments. Further, BJW-others also motivates people to perceive that others are treated as they deserve. It may therefore be an important enabler of the pursuit of personal power and prestige, by legitimizing the adverse effects of that pursuit on other people

(Strelan & van Prooijen, 2014). Thus, BJW-others is likely to foster dominance, status, leadership, and demonstration goals.

1.3. The present study

The present study aims to connect, and therefore contribute, to two previously separate literatures: the study of just-world belief, and the study of social goals. In a cross-sectional design, university students completed measures of BJW-self, BJW-others, social goals, and three indicators of subjective well-being: flourishing, positive affect balance, and optimistic future-directed thinking. Based on previous theory and research on BJW-self and BJW-others, we predicted that BJW-self would be related to prosocial and affiliative social goals (including nurturance, intimacy, and social development goals) whereas BJW-others would be related to goals related to power and status (including status, leadership, dominance, demonstration-approach, and demonstration-avoidance goals).

Further analyses were more exploratory. First, because previous research indicates that BJW-others and BJW-self frequently act as mutual suppressors, we explored the possibility that BJW-self and BJW-others are related to social goals in opposing directions (employing multiple regression analyses and examining semipartial correlations). Second, we explored relationships between social goals and general indices of well-being. Relatively little is known about these relationships, since past research on social goals has largely focused on social and academic outcomes. Further, since relationships between BJW and well-being are well-established, the present research offers an opportunity to conduct a first preliminary investigation of the possibility that social goals may be relevant to those relationships.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

398 students (47 male, 348 female, 3 undeclared) studying at the [name of university] were

recruited via the School of Psychology's Research Participation Scheme. Students volunteered to participate for extra course credits and completed all measures online using the Qualtrics® platform, which required to respond to all questions to prevent missing data. Mean age of students was 19.6 years ($SD = 3.6$). Students indicated their ethnicity as White (67%), Asian (14%), Black (10%), mixed race (6%), and other (3%).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. *Just-world beliefs*

To measure just-world beliefs, we used the Belief in a Just World Scales (Lipkus et al., 1996) differentiating BJW-self (8 Items; e.g., "I feel that the world treats me fairly," "I feel that I get what I deserve") and BJW-others (8 Items; "I feel that the world treats people fairly," "I feel that people get what they deserve"). For the BJW-self items, participants were asked: "How well do you think the following statements apply to YOU?" For the BJW-others items, they were asked: "How well do you think the following statements apply to OTHERS (people other than yourself)?" Participants responded to all items on a scale from 1 (*disagree*) to 7 (*agree*). Both scales showed good reliability (Cronbach's alphas = .88 and .89).

2.2.2. *Social goals*

To measure social goals, we used the measures that Shim and Fletcher (2012) used examining social content and social achievement goals. To measure social content goals, we used the items they adapted from Jarvinen and Nicholls (1996). The item section began with the word stem "When I'm with people my own age, I like it when..." followed by 28 items capturing nurturance (5 items; e.g., "I can make them feel good"), intimacy (6 items; e.g., "They tell me about their feelings"), status (6 items; e.g., "They like me better than anyone else"), leadership (5 items; e.g., "They say I'm the boss"), and dominance (6 items; e.g., "I make them do what I want") goals. To measure social achievement goals, we used the 18 items they adapted

from Ryan and Shim (2008) capturing social development (6 items; e.g., “It is important to me to learn more about other students and what they are like”), demonstration–approach (6 items; e.g., “It is important to me that other students think I am popular”), and demonstration–avoidance (6 items; e.g., “It is important to me that I don’t embarrass myself around my friends”) goals. Items were presented with an instruction informing participants about the content of the items (“Listed below are a number of statements concerning social goals...”), and participants responded to all items on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). All scores showed good reliability ($.81 \leq \text{alphas} \leq .83$).

2.2.3. Subjective well-being

To measure subjective well-being, we assessed three key indicators of subjective well-being and combined them into a index (see below): flourishing (regarding the past two weeks), positive and negative affect (regarding the past two weeks), and positive and negative future-directed thinking (regarding the next two weeks).

To measure flourishing, we used the 8-item Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010) capturing key aspects of flourishing (e.g., “I lead a purposeful and meaningful life”). Because we were interested in participants’ current level of flourishing, we followed Stoeber and Corr (2016) in converting the items to past tense (e.g., “I led a purposeful and meaningful life”), and asked participants to indicate the extent they had felt this way during the past two weeks using a scale from 1 (*disagree*) to 7 (*agree*). Scores showed excellent reliability ($\alpha = .91$).

To measure positive and negative affect, we used the short form of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) from Stoeber, Harvey, Ward, and Childs (2011) capturing, with 5 items each, positive affect (e.g., enthusiastic, determined) and negative affect (scared, distressed). To assess current affect, we used the same timeframe as for flourishing and asked participants to indicate the extent they had felt this way during the past two

weeks using a scale from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Both scores showed good reliability (alphas = .85 and .86).

To measure positive and negative future-directed thinking (FDT), we used the Subjective Probability Task (MacLeod, Byrne, & Valentine, 1996) presenting participants with 10 positive events (e.g., “You will make good and lasting friendships”) and 20 negative events (“You will have a serious disagreement with a good friend,” “You will fall badly behind in your work”) and asking participants to rate the subjective probability of each event. Following Stoeber and Corr (2017), participants were asked to indicate the likelihood that the event would occur in the next two weeks, responding on a scale from 1 (*not likely to occur*) to 7 (*extremely likely to occur*). Both scores showed good to excellent reliability (alphas = .88 and .93).

Because our predictions did not differentiate between positive and negative affect and positive and negative FDT, we first combined positive and negative affect by subtracting participants’ mean items scores for negative affect from those for positive affect (these were correlated, $r(385) = -.15, p = .002$) and called the resulting variable “positive affect balance.” Then we combined positive and negative FDT by subtracting the mean item scores for positive events from those for negative events, ($r = -.43, p < .001$) and called the resulting variable “optimistic FDT.” Finally—because (a) our predictions did not differentiate between different indicators of subjective well-being, (b) we expected the indicators to be robustly related to each other, and (c) we aimed for parsimony of presentation and statistical testing (reducing Type I error)—we created a composite index of well-being. To do so, we standardized the scores for flourishing, positive affect balance, and optimistic FDT and used the mean of these scores in the regression analyses.

2.3. Data screening

Because multivariate outliers distort the results of correlation and regression analyses, we

excluded 11 participants who showed a Mahalanobis distance with a χ^2 of $p < .001$ (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), so the final sample comprised 387 participants. Next, we examined whether the variance-covariance matrices of male and female participants differed by computing a Box's M test with gender as between-participants factor. The test was nonsignificant, $p = .525$, indicating that the matrices were near-identical. Consequently, all analyses were collapsed across gender.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between variables are presented in Table 1. Well-being was found to be related to all social goals except for status and demonstration-approach. Specifically, it was positively related to nurturance, intimacy, leadership, and social development, and negatively related to dominance and demonstration-avoidance. The bivariate correlations also show that BJW-self was positively related, whereas BJW-others was unrelated, to well-being. Since BJW-self and BJW-others were positively correlated, we computed multiple regression analyses entering BJW-self and BJW-others simultaneously as predictors to determine their unique relations with social goals and subjective well-being. Table 2 shows the resulting semipartial correlations.

Our key hypotheses concerned the relationship between both spheres of BJW and social goals. As can be seen in Table 2, every social goal was related to BJW-self and BJW-others in opposite directions. BJW-self was significantly related to all social goals except for status, being positively related to nurturance, intimacy, and social development goals, and negatively related to leadership, dominance, and demonstration-approach and avoidance goals. In contrast, BJW-others was positively related to status, leadership, dominance, demonstration-approach, and demonstration-avoidance goals, negatively related to nurturance and intimacy, and was not significantly related to social development.

These regression analyses also confirmed that BJW-self showed positive relations with all

indicators of subjective well-being. In contrast, BJW-others was not significantly related to well-being. Additional analyses confirmed that these patterns held in both zero-order and semipartial correlations when positive and negative affect and optimistic and pessimistic FDT were examined separately: for BJW-self, all $ps < .024$, for BJW-others, all $ps > .090$.

4. Discussion

4.1. The present findings

The present study provides the first empirical examination of relations between people's just-world beliefs and the social goals that motivate their social behavior. Findings supported predictions derived from the bidimensional model of BJW. BJW-self and BJW-others were related to most social goals in opposing directions. Consistent with the view that BJW-self is an explicit index of faith in the personal contract (Dalbert, 1999; Sutton & Winnard, 2007), BJW-self was positively related to social goals that require the suspension of immediate and narrow self-interest to become closer to others, namely intimacy, nurturance, and social development goals. In contrast, BJW-others was positively related to dominance, demonstration–avoidance, and demonstration–approach goals. This finding is consistent with the view that BJW-others motivates people to dominate and manipulate others, or makes it easier to do so (Strelan & van Prooijen, 2014; Sutton & Winnard, 2007). Taken together, the present findings not only confirm the bidimensional model of BJW, but also extend it by showing that the two BJW dimensions—which have shown different relations with social attitudes and social behaviors—also show different and in fact opposing relations with social goals.

The present results also cast light on relationships between social goals and well-being. Most social goals were related to well-being, and results supported previous theorizing suggesting that affiliative social goals including nurturing, intimacy, caring, and social development are associated with positive outcomes, whereas demonstration goals are less

adaptive (although only demonstration-approach goals were significantly associated with lower well-being). A marked difference was also observed between leadership and dominance goals, which were positively and negatively related to well-being, respectively. These results add support to speculation that leadership goals may be a benign manifestation of the desire for power (Kiefer & Ryan, 2008), whereas dominance goals may be a malign variant of that desire (Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996).

These findings open up new directions for research. It has recently been discovered that relationships between BJW and its outcomes are mediated by abstract representations of the social group (Lucas et al., 2014) and human nature (Bartholomaeus & Strelan, 2016). The present studies suggest that different spheres of BJW are related differently to social goals, another important class of abstract representation that is linked directly to social behaviour (Ryan & Shim, 2008) and, as the present studies indicate, general well-being. These recent developments in research may help build a theoretical specification of the mechanisms that link BJW to social decision making and psychological adjustment¹.

4.2. Limitations and future studies

Our study had a number of limitations. First, the sample was predominantly female (87%). Whereas this is representative of British university students in psychology (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2015), future studies should reexamine our findings with samples including a larger percentage of males. Second, our study employed a cross-sectional design. Consequently, the relations we found should not be interpreted in a causal or temporal fashion.

¹ The cross-sectional design and number of candidate mediators (social goals) in the present study mean that mediation analyses can be interpreted only with extreme caution. A summary of mediation analyses is presented in supplementary materials.

Future studies may profit from employing longitudinal designs to examine whether just-world beliefs predict changes in people's social goals and subjective well-being over time. Third, because we examined British students, our findings may apply only to people from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Among populations experiencing chronic material adversity, and in collectivist cultures, BJW-others tends to be endorsed more strongly and may be more adaptive (Wu et al., 2013). Future studies may investigate whether cultural differences play a role in how BJW relates to social goals and subjective well-being.

4.3. Conclusions

The present study contributes to the literature on social content and achievement goals by showing that BJW is relevant to the formation of such goals. Further, it contributes to literature on BJW by providing a relational perspective on BJW, by showing that BJW is relevant to the goals that people pursue in their social lives. This relational perspective may help explain the psychological consequences of BJW, over and above its value in making sense of the world. Different dimensions of BJW appear to have different effects not only on the way people relate to others, but also on the goals they pursue when they do so.

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Table 1

Bivariate Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Belief in a just world (BJW)														
1. BJW-self														
2. BJW-others	.29***													
Social content goals														
3. Nurturance														
4. Intimacy	.16**	-.17***												
5. Status	.15**	-.13*	.67***											
6. Leadership	-.02	.10	.38***	.49***										
7. Dominance	-.04	.16**	.13**	.21***	.67***									
Social achievement goals														
8. Social development														
9. Demonstration–approach	.25***	-.02	.54***	.50***	.30***	.13*	-.15**							
10. Demonstration–avoidance	-.07	.24***	-.07	.04	.55***	.42***	.45***	.17***						
	-.09	.09	.08	.14**	.28***	.10*	.14**	.31***	.44***					

Subjective well-being

11. Flourishing	.39***	.03	.34***	.27***	.15**	.20***	-.08	.28***	-.07	-.23***				
12. Positive affect balance	.29***	.05	.11*	.02	-.03	.08	-.09	.07	-.08	-.26***	.64***			
13. Optimistic FDT	.37***	.08	.16**	.15**	.09	.14**	-.09	.15**	-.08	-.32***	.68***	.63***		
14. Well-being (composite)	.40***	.06	.22***	.16**	.08	.16**	-.10*	.18***	-.09	-.32***	.86***	.86***	.91***	
<i>M</i>	4.66	3.28	5.69	5.52	4.15	3.38	2.24	5.45	3.08	4.23	4.95	0.97	2.42	0.01
<i>SD</i>	1.05	1.17	0.95	1.06	1.26	1.19	1.05	0.92	1.25	1.33	1.17	1.38	1.76	0.87

Note. $N = 387$. FDT = future-directed thinking. Variables represent mean items scores. See Section 2.2 for explanation of variables.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2

BJW-Self versus BJW-Others: Semipartial Correlations

Variable	Belief in a just world (BJW)				Model adj. R^2
	BJW-self		BJW-others		
	r	sr^2	r	sr^2	
Social goals					
Social content goals					
Nurturance	.22***	.05	-.23***	.05	.08***
Intimacy	.19***	.04	-.18***	.03	.05***
Status	-.05	.00	.11*	.01	.01
Leadership	-.11*	.01	.18***	.03	.03**
Dominance	-.21***	.04	.25***	.06	.09***
Social achievement goals					
Social development	.27***	.07	-.09	.01	.08***
Demonstration–approach	-.15**	.02	.29***	.08	.09***
Demonstration–avoidance	-.13*	.02	.12*	.01	.02*
Subjective well-being					
Flourishing	.40***	.16	-.09	.01	.16***
Positive affect balance	.29***	.08	-.03	.00	.08***
Optimistic FDT	.36***	.13	-.03	.00	.13***
Well-being	.40***	.16	-.06	.00	.16***

Note. $N = 387$. Semipartial correlations from multiple regressions simultaneously entering BJW-self and BJW-others as predictors. FDT = future-directed thinking. See Section 2.2 for explanation of variables.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Supplementary file

To examine whether BJW was related to the well-being via social goals (BJW → social goals → well-being), we used PROCESS (Hayes, 2013, Model 4) to conduct mediation analyses bootstrapping with 10,000 samples and testing significances with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. In the first analysis, BJW-self was the predictor (with BJW-others as covariate), the social goals were the proposed mediators, and the composite was the criterion. In the second analysis, BJW-others was the predictor (with BJW-self as covariate). Results are displayed in Table S1 below. These reveal significant indirect paths between BJW-self and well-being via leadership (-), dominance (+), and demonstration-avoidance (+; here, BJW-self was negatively related to demonstration-avoidance, which in turn was negatively related to well-being). They also reveal significant indirect paths between BJW-others and well-being via leadership (+), dominance (-), and demonstration-avoidance (-). Additional analyses revealed that all significant indirect paths held for each separate index of well-being (flourishing, positive affect balance, and optimistic FDT). However, the stability and interpretability of these mediation analyses is undermined by the quite strong correlations between social goals, the small size of the indirect effects, and the problem of endogeneity. For this reason, we have not included the mediation analyses in the article. They are provided in this supplementary file in case they may help guide further research.

Table S1

Summary of Mediation Analyses of Belief in Just World (BJW) Predicting Well-Being via Social Goals

	BJW-self	BJW-others
Model statistics		
Total effect	.351 [.271; .433]	-.042 [-.113; .029]
Direct effect	.280 [.200; .360]	-.007 [-.077; .063]
Indirect effect	.071 [.021; .123]	-.035 [-.075; .005]
Specific indirect effects (IEs)		
Social content goals		
Nurturance	.020 [-.006; .055]	.093 [-.027; .213]
Intimacy	-.004 [-.031; .021]	-.017 [-.121; .087]
Status	.003 [-.004; .022]	-.004 [-.026; .009]
Leadership	-.032 [-.069; -.006]	.047 [.019; .088]
Dominance	.034 [.009; .069]	-.034 [-.067; -.011]
Social achievement goals		
Social development	.022 [-.007; .069]	-.006 [-.021; .001]
Demonstration–approach	-.004 [-.024; .012]	.006 [-.021; .035]
Demonstration–avoidance	.032 [.003; .068]	-.029 [-.059; -.007]

Note. $N = 387$. Model statistics and IEs are for BJW-self controlling for BJW-other, and vice versa.

Boldfaced values are significant (tested with bootstrapping a 95% confidence interval; see values in square brackets).