The Just World Theory and its application to bullying prevention- with thanks to Ken Rigby
By Stan Davis

Melvin Lerner wrote *The Belief in a Just World* and co-wrote *Responses to Victimization and the Belief in a Just World* to summarize decades of research that illuminate a crucial question: Why do some people blame the victims of oppression or catastrophe? Why do some people blame people living in poverty for their situations? And more to the point for our work with bullying prevention, why do some people blame the targets of bullying for what is done to them? We see these phenomena often in our everyday lives even in situations where the person who is hurt or victimized may have done nothing wrong. When we hear about a fatal automobile accident, we often speculate about whether the person had been wearing a seat belt. In our work in bullying prevention, when school staff or students hear about a student being bullied, one frequent response is to insist that the target must have done something to provoke the behavior. Those of us who train educators or other professionals are often asked about the characteristics of “victims” of bullying, as though those victims were partly to blame for what is being done to them. Some educators continue to use mediation-based approaches in bullying situations, with the assumption that both students are partly to blame. Lerner’s work helps us understand this kind of thinking and points the way to interventions with school staff and students that make positive supportive actions more likely and blame-the-victim reactions less likely.

Lerner’s research tells us that when someone witnesses someone else being hurt and does not do something about it, that person may react to the guilt feelings that follow by creating a narrative in which the person who was hurt deserved what was done to them. He writes, “...people will reject, or at least devalue, an innocent victim, if they are not able to intervene effectively to stop the injustice.(1980, p.50)” Lerner called this process an outcome of a “Belief in a Just World”- that is, a belief that “we live in and attempt to function in an environment where we can get what we deserve.(1980, p.156)”. For example, when people who seem to be homeless ask us for money, it is easiest for most people to believe that those people are homeless because they drank, because they had poor work skills, or because of some other action or inaction on their own part. It is more difficult to believe that the person who is talking us may have worked hard, saved, and wound up in the street because of a catastrophic flood, the collapse of an industry they worked in or because they had to pay a large medical bill. Lerner’s research tells us that when people create a fictional narrative like the ones above in which they blame the victim, that narrative both reassures them that they have control over their own lives and absolves them of guilt about their choice not to help the other person. He writes, “...the Belief in a Just World is at the foundation of our own sense of security, and we erect increasingly elaborate defenses when necessary to protect that belief.” A similar statement of this theory is found in Lerner and Montada (1998, page 1), “By blaming, rejecting, or avoiding the victim,... people are able to maintain their confidence in the justness of the world in which they must live or work for their future security.”

In trying to understand Lerner’s work, I have learned to differentiate between his construct of a Belief in a Just World, which states that the world is a fair place, and a passion for social justice, which states that the world is not yet fair place, but that it should become one. It is the first of these two belief systems, Lerner’s research states, that is responsible for people devaluing and blaming victims of injustice and other tragedy.
Having identified one of the sources of blame-the-victim thinking, Lerner and many other researchers in social psychology conducted numerous studies to determine how we can help people think differently about injustice and cruelty. In these two books he and his co-workers outline some actions that make it less likely that people will devalue and criticize victims of trauma and injustice:

- The researchers found that observers’ tendency to devalue the victim of injustice or trauma increased with the duration of the injustice. The more adults in a school take rapid and timely action to stop incidents of bullying, the less likely peers are to devalue and avoid the target.
- As referred to above, when people see a clear path toward actions they can take to reduce injustice or cruelty and succeed in helping others, they are less likely to devalue or blame the victim for what has happened. This finding emphasizes the importance of helping both staff and young people find a range of safe and effective interventions to use when they witness bullying or other peer cruelty. It is equally important that staff and students get specific, concrete feedback about the effectiveness of their actions.
- Subjects who saw others taking action to stop injustice were more likely to take action themselves. Subjects who saw others ignoring the injustice were less likely to take action themselves. This research parallels other work about inaction by bystanders. In our work in schools, we should remember that inaction by adults is seen by students as confirmation that they should not act either. Consistent action by adults can cue youth to act as well. Training a group of students to set a good example, include excluded youth, and tell adults about what is going on can have a similar positive effect, especially if those students are seen as acting positively because they want to help instead of because they are identified as members of a special team.
- In their experiments Lerner found that instructing the subjects who witnessed simulated cruel behavior to empathize with the victims reduced the subjects’ tendency to devalue and avoid the victims. When told “imagine this is happening to you,” subjects were less likely to use the blaming response associated with Belief in a Just World. It seems to me that we put this finding to work when we help students see that any of them could be targets of bullying, harassment, or cruelty depending on the setting they are in and on forces out of their control. We can use that awareness to help them imagine that the negative behavior that they see is happening to them or to a younger sibling or friend. When they imagine this possibility, they are less likely to blame, exclude, or avoid targets of injustice.
- Reminding the subjects that they were not supposed to blame the victims they were observing led to reductions in blame-the-victim thinking. This finding raises the question for me: do we make this simple and explicit statement in our trainings and classroom discussions? If we do not, we miss an opportunity to make a difference.

I find Lerner et al’s work valuable in our work in preventing bullying and recommend it to you highly. I welcome your thoughts...

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