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Belief in a just world and aspects of family functioning in emerging adulthood: Comparative analysis regressions vs QCA

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ABSTRACT:

The belief in a just world refers to individuals' belief that the world is a just place where everyone gets what they deserve. Although it is created in childhood, it plays an adaptive role throughout the life cycle. This paper analyses the relationships between belief in a just world and variables of family functioning in the Spanish population during emerging adulthood, comparing multiple linear regression models and comparative qualitative analysis. 341 young people aged 19-25 ($M=21.77$, $SD=1.78$), 82.2% of whom were women, participated in this study. The instruments used explore beliefs in a just world, and various aspects of family functioning. Regression models indicate that family variables are not related to belief in a just world. In comparative qualitative analysis, different combinations of family variables account 31% of strong beliefs in a just world. High levels of family resources, low levels of family communication and being a man are therefore related to the strong presence of beliefs in a just world. The results show that family functioning variables remain important for belief in a just world, even during emerging adulthood.

KEYWORDS: belief in just world, family, emerging adulthood, QCA.

RESUMEN:

El objetivo del presente trabajo es analizar las relaciones existentes entre la creencia general en un mundo justo y variables de funcionamiento familiar en población española durante la adultez emergente; todo ello, comparando modelos de regresión lineal múltiple y de análisis cualitativos comparativos, que permiten una visión más holística. Los participantes fueron 341 jóvenes, con edades entre 19-25 años ($M=21,77$, $DT=1,78$) siendo el 82,2% mujeres. Los instrumentos utilizados exploran las creencias en un mundo justo, y diversos aspectos de funcionamiento familiar. Mientras que los modelos de regresión indican que las variables familiares no presentan relación con la creencia en un mundo justo, en los análisis cualitativos, diferentes combinaciones de variables familiares explican el 31% de altas creencias en un mundo justo. En concreto, altos recursos familiares, baja comunicación familiar y ser hombre, se relacionan con la alta presencia de creencias en un mundo justo. Los resultados muestran que las variables de funcionamiento familiar continúan siendo importantes para las creencias en un mundo justo, incluso durante la adultez emergente.

PALABRAS CLAVE: creencia de mundo justo, familia, adulez emergente, QCA.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of belief in a just world (BJW), a term conceptualized by Lerner (Lerner, 1965), refers to individuals' belief that the world is a just place where everyone gets what they deserve. This concept has an important adaptive function in the individual (Furham, 2003). BJW avoids the anguish and uncertainty of living in an unpredictable environment and has two effects that occur at different levels. On the one hand, these beliefs are salutogenic for individuals, as they provide psychological buffers against the reality of the world, personal control over one's own destiny, allow planning for the future, and are positively related to coping strategies (Barreiro et al., 2018; Furham, 2003). On the other hand, they also have negative consequences for social life, since numerous studies corroborate that BJW is positively associated with authoritarianism, by encouraging various forms of intolerance, prejudice and discrimination (Barreiro et al., 2014).

Although BJW is formed in infancy, and depends largely on parenting styles, with the increase in abstract cognition during adolescence, two types of differing beliefs emerge (Dalbert & Stoeber, 2006; Kamble & Dalbert, 2012). Personal BJW is the extent to which people believe that their world is individually just and they get what they deserve in their daily interactions (Correia et al., 2016; Dalbert, 2009). Having a strong personal BJW is protective against widespread fear of random injustices, and enables high internal control and a sense of security within family circles (Dalbert, 2009). It is formed at an early stage of development, through the consistency and impartiality of the family climate and individual experiences (Dalbert & Radant, 2004). Meanwhile, a general BJW is the extent to which people believe that the world in its abstract form, and not just in their individual case, is fair. This belief incorporates assumptions about society in general and is not necessarily the same as BJW at the personal level. In other words, people may cling to the belief that they will be treated personally fairly (strong personal BJW), but still recognize injustices in society (weak general BJW) (Nudelman, 2013). The distinction between personal and general BJW is a reflection that the former is more closely related to the individual's well-being (Dalbert & Stoeber, 2006), reduces levels of depression and is salutogenic, whereas the general BJW is linked to more negative aspects, such as attitudes of discrimination (Dalbert, 2009).

Previous studies indicate that BJW is a relatively stable concept throughout the life cycle (Furham, 2003). However, more recent studies indicate that general and personal BJW decline but decline at different rates throughout secondary education (Adoric, 2011). Personal BJW tends to be stronger than general BJW at all ages, and the gap between them increases with age (Barreiro, 2013; Oppenheimer, 2006). A hypothesis is that personal and general BJW decrease at different rates, to help adolescents progressively adapt to the understanding that the world is not always just (Donat et al., 2018). No differences between men and women have been found for BJW (Dalbert & Stoeber, 2006; Furham, 2003; Kendra & Mucherach, 2016; Oppenheimer, 2006). As for culture, there do not seem to be differences between the BJWs in different countries (Kendra & Mucherach, 2016). This does not indicate that there are similar levels of justice in all these countries, but instead that each culture probably has its own baseline. However, adolescents' relative perception of how just the world is appeared to be fairly consistent across the different countries studied (Kendra & Mucherach, 2016).

Belief in a just world is therefore a personal, subjective disposition, which can be affected by personal experiences, family situations, etc. (Dalbert & Radant, 2004). For this reason, it has an extraordinary influence on behaviour, adapting to the aforementioned rules and therefore once again influencing people's social behaviour (Dalbert et al., 2001). The fact that it constitutes a personal resource (Furham, 2003) and a coping strategy causes it to guide and benefit social interactions, such as family relationships. A strong BJW

therefore seems to function as a personal resource regardless of context (Alves et al., 2018; Peter et al., 2013). This leads us to ask how the BJW relates to other coping strategies from other contexts, such as the family.

The family context, and parents, are especially important for the foundation and maintenance of beliefs in a just world (Dalbert & Radant, 2004). In general, numerous studies indicate that different types of family functioning have a significant impact on children's development and emotional adjustment. Good family communication positively influences adolescent development, insofar as it is related to better self-esteem, feelings of health and well-being, and more appropriate strategies for coping with difficulties. This communication within the family also helps the adolescent to clarify their ideas and feelings, and facilitates their autonomy and independence while learning to be sensitive to the perspectives of others (Parra et al., 2015; Sánchez-Quejía et al., 2016). However, in addition to family communication, variables such as the family climate and cohesion are acknowledged as basic pillars in children's development (Ortega-Barón et al., 2016; Rodríguez-Mateo et al., 2018).

In fact, authors such as Dalbert & Radant (2004) propose a theoretical model that relates the BJW and various family aspects. The three-factor parental model (family climate, restriction, and autonomy) emphasizes that greater positive family orientation (family climate) leads to greater belief in a just world. On the other hand, belief in justice also arises from laws or norms, so an absence of norms or rules (restriction) within the family can lead to a lack of sense of justice in the world. Finally, the autonomy factor does not seem to be related to the idea of a just world. It is therefore logical that the BJW relates positively to a balanced family climate, a more rule-oriented family, and fewer conflicts (Dalbert, 2009). In this area, studies on the personal BJW have identified how the family climate is the main variable for its development (Dalajka & Ješek, 2008), and there is some disagreement about whether a rule-oriented family style (restriction) is directly related to BJW. The studies carried out to date have focused primarily on analysing the influence of family aspects in relation to the personal BJW (when the type of BJW was specified), but not so much on the relationship of the general BJW - an aspect that is considered in this study.

Research on BJW has also focused more on childhood and adolescence, traditionally from the perspective of the Piagetian cognitive model (Barreiro, 2013), while leaving aside a recent term such as emerging adulthood or late adolescence (Arnett, 2016), which is analysed in this paper. Today, young people take longer to complete their education, which means they obtain stable employment later, and with it they become independent and adopt roles characteristic of adulthood at a later stage.

Emerging adulthood is the period between 18 and 29 years of age, which has become a cultural phenomenon in industrialized societies as a result of the sociodemographic changes of recent decades, such as increased access to university education, an increase in the labour force, and the postponement of milestones such as marriage and having children (Arnett, 2016). Although it is a culturally constructed concept, some characteristic features of this stage in personal evolution have been identified both in studies in America (Arnett et al., 2011) and Latin America (Barrera-Herrera & Vinet, 2018): a) it is a period of exploration, b) it is a period for building identity, and c) it is an intermediate period, between adolescence and adulthood (Kins et al., 2014). In Spain, emerging adulthood has not been such an extensively studied concept, although some authors maintain that there is a Mediterranean model of transition to adulthood, characterised by giving great importance to family relationships and a delay in leaving the family home and in the age of paternity and maternity (Parra et al., 2015). During emerging adulthood, family relationships are therefore perceived with the same or higher quality than during adolescence (Crocetti & Meeus, 2014) with a positive impact on their well-being (Megías et al., 2019).

Another contribution of this study is its comparison between two different methodologies, namely linear regressions, and qualitative comparative analysis of diffuse sets (QCA). While regression models are based on an individual contribution and do not (a priori) account for the interaction or combination of the different variables studied, Qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) is an analytical technique that examines how a series of causal conditions contribute to a given outcome. Likewise, only the linear relationship

between variables can be studied in linear models, but this does not account for other types of non-linear relationships as QCA models can. This type of model also considers equifinality, which is the possibility of obtaining different models or roads that give rise to the same result (Eng & Woodside, 2012; Ragin, 2008). Another advantage of QCA over linear regressions is its ability to identify combinations of multiple causes. In regression analysis, there is a limit to the number of interaction effects that can be included in an analysis, but not in the QCA. In addition, the results of QCA analysis are more detailed and allow for more horizontal complexity than regression analysis. Despite the differences between them, in general, the literature recommends the use of the two methodologies in a complementary manner (Navarro-Mateu et al., 2020; Villanueva et al., 2017).

For all these reasons, the aim of this study is to examine the relationships between the general belief in a just world and family functioning variables during emerging adulthood in the Spanish population. The hypotheses considered in this study are as follows: H1: family functioning variables will significantly predict the overall BJW; H2: QCA models will provide complementary information to linear regression models, offering different combinations of variables for the same result.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Participants

A total of 341 young people participated, ranging in age from 19 to 25 years old, with an average age of 21.77 (SD=1.78). 82.2% (277) were women and 18.8% (64) were men. Although a total of 447 young people was initially selected, the 341 named in this study were finally selected, as the rest did not complete at least 80% of the questionnaires or were outside the 18-25 age range.

Instruments

The Belief in a just world-others scale

The Belief in a just world-others scale (Lipkus, 1991)- the Spanish version adapted from the original by Barreiro et al. (2014). This is a Likert scale consisting of seven items, with five response types ranging from 1: Totally Disagree to 5: Totally Agree. Examples of the items include: "I think people get what they're entitled to, "I think people have earned the rewards and punishments they receive?. Higher scores indicate higher levels of belief in a general fair world. This instrument has demonstrated adequate psychometric properties in previous studies (Barreiro et al 2014), and this is also observed in the present study: $\alpha = .60$.

The Family Functioning Scale.

The original version was by Dunst, Trivette & Deal (1988) and the adapted version is by Larraín et al. (2003). It is a self-administered questionnaire with 20 items, which are valued according to a Likert scale of five points, which ranges between "my family almost never" which scores one point, and "my family almost always," which scores five points. The scale was designed to identify and evaluate the resources available to the family, and is organized into three dimensions that represent the various aspects of the family functioning style:

Family Identity: this refers to the commitment to the search for well-being and development towards maturity of each person and family group; the appreciation of the aspects that family members do well, and

the degree of stimulation required to improve them, e.g. "Our family is able to make decisions about what to do when we have problems.

Communication: this refers to family rules, values, and beliefs that establish expectations about what is desirable and acceptable, e.g. "We talked about different ways of dealing with and solving problems."

Resource mobilization and coping strategies: the repertoire of coping strategies for coping with life events; the ability to solve problems and evaluate the various options that lead to the satisfaction of needs, e.g. "We try to forget our problems for a while when they seem insurmountable".

The alpha coefficient for the full scale is .88 on the original scale adapted to Spanish (Larraín et al. 2003) and in this study, it is .78.

Procedure

The participants in this research were recruited by convenience sampling and were all students at the University of Valencia. Their participation was voluntary and anonymous, followed the signing of informed consent, and they were informed that the data collected would be used exclusively for academic-scientific purposes. The questionnaire was administered collectively, in classrooms during teaching hours, by the authors of the study, in a single session, lasting approximately 30 minutes.

Data analysis

First the descriptive analyses of the variables studied were carried out, then the calibration values for QCA were calculated, and then the hierarchical regression models (MRJ) and a qualitative comparative analysis of diffuse sets (QCA) were performed. The raw data from the participants' responses had to be transformed for the qualitative comparative analysis of diffuse sets. First, as suggested in the literature (Claude and Christopher 2014), all the missing data were eliminated and all conditions (variables) were calculated by multiplying the scores of their items (Navarro-Mateu et al. 2020). Before performing the analysis, the values had to be recalibrated between 0 and 1. When we consider only two values, we use 0 (which does not have the characteristic) and 1 (which has the characteristic): sex (feminine=0; masculine=1). However, to perform re-calibration with more than two values, it is necessary to consider the following three thresholds: 10% (low-level or totally outside the set), 50% (intermediate level, neither inside nor outside the set), and 90% (high level or totally inside the set). With continuous variables or with factors from a survey (made up of different items), we must introduce these three values in order to perform an automatic re-calibration of values between 0 and 1. In this case, the fsQCA 3 software.0 by Claude and Christopher (2014) re-calibrated the values for age, belief in a just world, family identity, communication and resources considering the three thresholds (Woodside 2013): This was followed by an analysis of need and sufficiency to assess the effect of the causal conditions (demographic variables and family aspects) on the outcome conditions (belief in a just world).

The analysis establishes the necessary causes, i.e. those that must always be present for a given result to occur, and the sufficient conditions, which while they are not always present when a result occurs, can lead to a given result. The QCA models make it possible to identify the percentage of variance explained, or cases in which the model is complied with - the coverage - as well as indicators of goodness of fit, or consistency (Eng and Woodside 2012; Ragin 2008).

When identifying sufficient conditions, QCA analysis involves two stages (Eng and Woodside 2012). First, QCA models are based on a Boolean or intersection logic and assume the influence of an attribute or attributes on a specific outcome. Second, QCA analysis generates three possible solutions: complex, parsimonious, and intermediate. The literature recommends using the latter (presented here)(Ragin 2008).

IBM SPSS Statistics 24 (IBM Corporation) software was used to perform descriptive analyses of the variables studied, to calculate calibration values, and for the hierarchical regression model, while fsQCA 3.0 software (Claude and Christopher 2014) was used to perform QCA analyses.

RESULTS

First, we present the main descriptors and calibration values for the variables studied (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Main descriptions and calibration values

		BJW		FFS	
	Age	BJW	FI	FR	FC
<i>M</i>	21.77	1644.75	51.54	4287.10	560.11
<i>SD</i>	1.77	47478.34	62.35	1564.06	287.18
<i>Min</i>	19	1	3	546	24
<i>Max</i>	25	50000	1100	13356	3080
<i>Calibration values</i>					
<i>P10</i>	19	16.80	16	2251.20	246
<i>P50</i>	22	432	48	4287.10	540
<i>P90</i>	24	3571.20	80	6270	864

Note: BJW: Belief in a just world; FFS: family functioning style; FI=family identity; FR=family resources; FC=family communication; M=mean; SD=standard deviation

Hierarchical Regression Model (HRM)

The predictive power of the variables studied was analysed using a hierarchical regression model, with the criterion variable being belief in a just world and sociodemographic predictor variables (sex and age) and family predictor variables (personal identity, communication, and resources). Two differential steps were established in the model. First, sociodemographic variables (sex and age) were included and then family variables were introduced. In the regression model of belief in a just world, sociodemographic variables did not significantly increase variance in the first step ($\Delta R^2 = .02, p = .10$), and family variables also did not increase variance in the second step ($\Delta R^2 = .02, p = .10$). However, in this last step, the family resources variable showed a significant positive beta coefficient ($\beta = .18, p = .02$).

Qualitative comparative analysis of diffuse sets (QCA)

The QCA analyses were then carried out. First, as suggested by the literature, the need analyses were carried out, followed by the sufficiency analyses. As with the hierarchical regression model, the criterion variable was established (the outcome condition, according to QCA terminology) as belief in a just world and the predictor variables (causal conditions) were sociodemographic variables (sex and age) and family variables (personal identity, communication and resources).

Necessary analysis

Based on the results obtained (Table 2), there did not appear to be any condition necessary for the occurrence or otherwise of the belief of a just world, since the consistency was less than .90 in all cases (Ragin 2008). However, given the values of consistency, the most important condition, although it was not necessary, was being female.

TABLE 2
Analysis necessary to believe in a just world

	BJW		~BJW	
	Cons	Cov	Cons	Cov
Boy	.21	.51	.17	.49
Girl	.79	.44	.83	.56
Adult	.64	.58	.59	.64
Young	.60	.55	.61	.67
High Communication	.61	.56	.60	.66
Low Communication	.63	.56	.60	.65
High Identity	.62	.56	.60	.66
Low Identity	.62	.56	.59	.65
Many Resources	.66	.60	.57	.63
Few Resources	.59	.53	.64	.69

Note: ~: absence of condition; Necessary condition: consistency $\geq .90$;
BJW= belief in a just world, Consistency=consistency; Coverage=coverage

Sufficiency analysis

In the sufficiency analyses (Table 3), the resulting models for each of the dimensions offered the following results, starting with the premise that a model is informative in QCA when the consistency is around or above .74 (Eng and Woodside 2012).

In the prediction of high levels of belief in the world as a just place, four paths were observed that accounted for 31% of the cases with high levels (Total Consistency=.79; Total Coverage=.31). The most significant ways or combinations for predicting a strong belief in the world as a just place were: the result of the interaction of having many family resources, low levels of family identity, low levels of communication, and being older (Raw Coverage= .26, Consistency= .84); the interaction of having many family resources, being older and smaller (Raw Coverage= .09, Consistency= .77); and finally the combination of having many family resources, low levels of family communication and being smaller (Raw Coverage= .09, Consistency= .76). These accounted for 26%, 9% and 9% respectively.

On the other hand, when predicting low levels of belief in the world as a just place, five paths were observed that accounted for 54% of the cases with low levels (Total Consistency=.75; Total Coverage=.54). The most significant paths or combinations for predicting low levels of belief in a just world were: the result of the interaction of few family resources, high levels of identity and high levels of family communication (Raw Coverage= .30, Consistency=.81), which accounted for 30% of the cases with low levels. The second way was the interaction between having few family resources, high levels of family communication and being a woman (Raw coverage= .29, Consistency=.79), which accounted for 29% of the cases, and finally the combination

of having few family resources, high levels of family communication and being young (Raw coverage= .28, Consistency=.83), accounting for 28% of the cases.

TABLE 3

Summary of the three main sufficient conditions for belief in a just world: intermediate solution

Table 3

Summary of the three main sufficient conditions for belief in a just world: intermediate solution

<i>Limiting frequency: 1</i>	BJW			~BJW		
	<i>Consistency cutoff: .81</i>			<i>Consistency cutoff: .80</i>		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
Boy		●	●		○	
Adult	●	●				○
High	○		○	●	●	●
Communication	○					
High Identity				●		
Many resources	●	●	●	○	○	○
Raw coverage	.26	.09	.09	.30	.29	.29
Unique Coverage	.19	.02	.02	.01	.02	.01
Consistency	.84	.77	.76	.81	.79	.83
Total Consistency			.79			.75
Total Coverage			.31			.54

●=presence of condition, ○=absence of condition. ~=absence of condition; BJW=belief in a just world

●=presence of condition, ○=absence of condition. ~=absence of condition; BJW=belief in a just world

DISCUSSION

This study explores familiar characteristics as predictors of belief in the just world in emerging adulthood, by comparing two analytical methodologies, linear models and QCA models, as main objectives of the research. First, the results in relation to sociodemographic variables indicate that sex is a variable that influences belief in a just world, being men, in combination with other family aspects, the ones that present the strongest belief in a just world. This would not support previous studies, which argued that there were no differences between men and women in adolescence until the age of 25 (Dalbert and Stoeber 2006; Furham 2003; Kendra and Mucherach 2016; Oppenheimer 2006). Another of the variables analysed is age, as a stronger higher BJW is related to being older. This would also not support previous studies, which found that overall BJW decreased as age increased during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Adoric 2011).

The results of this study partially support the first hypothesis, i.e. family functioning variables significantly predict the general BJW, at least in the QCA qualitative analyses, which provide a greater number of combinations of variables to arrive at the same result. In specific terms, the most important aspect of family functioning for the BJW is family resources, a variable that appears significantly in both the analytical techniques used. High levels of family resources are therefore related to high general levels of belief in a just world. This result reinforces the findings of Peter et al (2013), who argue that belief in a just world functions as a coping strategy, regardless of the context.

The results of the rest of the variables of family functioning, communication and family identity are paradoxical since they are related to low levels of belief in a just world. All this is not consistent with the theoretical model of Dalbert and Radant (2004) on the importance of the family climate (variable comparable to the family identity), for belief in a just world. However, this may be because the study does not specify the type of BJW studied. In fact, subsequent studies with personal BJW did confirm the importance of the family climate variable (Dalajka and Ježek 2008). A possible explanation could be based on the results found by Dunst et al (1988), on the original scale of family functioning. These authors found that some of the dimensions of family functioning (specifically identity) were not related to well-being and positive affection and dismissed the assumption that all family dimensions contribute to cushioning negative functioning. Another possible explanation could be that some family dimensions are more closely related to a personal BJW (e.g. family identity as it contributes to security and control within family circles), and other dimensions to a general BJW (e.g. family resources as a more abstract aspect). This would be logical, since the two types of a BJW may not completely overlap (Dalbert and Radant 2004), and in fact, the gap and differentiation between them increases with age (Oppenheimer 2006). This aspect may have been reflected in the age group studied, i.e. emerging adulthood. Future studies should include both types of BJW in relation to family aspects, in order to ascertain this possible differential contribution.

When the two methodologies used were compared, the results supported the second hypothesis that QCA models will provide complementary information to linear regression models, offering different combinations of variables for the same result. Accordingly, it was found that in linear regression models, family variables are not significantly related to the overall BJW, although family resources show a positive and significant beta coefficient. However, with the same dataset, in QCA models the combination of different variables does predict the overall BJW. The results show that a high overall BJW relates to the interaction between adult, male, high personal resources, low levels of communication and low levels of identity. Likewise, QCA models were observed to increase the variance explained by allowing us to combine different conditions (sociodemographic and family variables). A 54% variance was observed in the BJW prediction of the participants when observing the QCA analyses. If regression models alone were available in this study, one might conclude that none of the variables considered significantly predicts a belief in a just world. However, the results of the QCA analysis offer more information, as there are family and sociodemographic variables involved in interaction in the prediction of high levels of BJW. It seems that QCA models are more explanatory in BJW analysis than linear regression models. Given that linear models and QCA models have different objectives, complementarity should be advocated, i.e. both techniques should be used simultaneously in future research, instead of focusing on one or the other (Navarro-Mateu et al. 2020).

Despite the contributions of this research, the study is not without limitations. The sampling procedures are neither probabilistic nor representative of the total set of emerging adulthood, and there is a greater proportion of women among the participants, which makes it difficult to generalize the results found. Probabilistic sampling should be used in future research. In addition, only general BJW was studied, and not personal BJW. In further studies, it would be interesting to make comparisons between the two in order to ascertain the differences in their relationship with family variables. Finally, this study is only based on the responses of young adults, so in the future it would be appropriate to include another source of information, such as parents. This would make it possible to determine the perception of each of the parties involved regarding the family construct studied.

Ultimately, even though BJW appears to form in infancy and tends to differentiate during adolescence, family functioning remains an important variable for BJW's even during emerging adulthood. This is possible particularly because of the positive relationship between BJW and family resources, thereby reaffirming the role of BJW as a personal strategy related to coping strategies in contexts other than the family. Future studies should examine the differential contribution of different family dimensions to types of BJW.

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