

**The Just World and the Systems Thinker:
How the Need to Believe in Deserved
Outcomes
Criminalises Accidental Harm**

*Why Accepting That an Accident Was Genuinely Accidental
Threatens the Observer's Deepest Psychological Need—
And What This Means for Justice*

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Abstract

Background: Prior papers in this series have identified multiple cognitive mechanisms that cause systems-oriented accounts of accidental events to be misinterpreted in legal settings: the fundamental attribution error, psychological distance, the far-fetched heuristic, availability bias, and the preference for conspiracy simplicity. The present paper identifies the deepest mechanism of all: the just-world fallacy. First described by Lerner (1980), the belief in a just world (BJW) is the cognitive bias that assumes people get what they deserve. When harm occurs, BJW creates a powerful psychological need to identify a blameworthy agent—because if harm can occur without anyone deserving it, the world is random, uncontrollable, and unsafe.

Method: Integrative review drawing on Lerner’s (1980) just-world theory, subsequent experimental research on victim blaming and blame attribution in accident contexts, and the framework established by the prior OMXUS studies.

Results: The just-world fallacy operates as the foundational driver beneath all previously identified mechanisms. It explains *why* observers need a simple cause (because complexity implies randomness), *why* they resist environmental explanations (because environment implies uncontrollability), *why* they prefer dispositional blame (because intention implies order), and *why* the systems thinker’s account is specifically threatening (because it explicitly describes a world in which harm emerges from conditions rather than choices). The BJW also creates a double bind for the accused: systemic explanations are rejected because they deny blame, but accepting blame for an accident one did not intend validates a false narrative. Research shows that observers will distort their interpretation of events, derogate victims, and inflate blame attributions specifically to preserve their belief that the world is just—even when the evidence contradicts this belief.

Conclusions: The just-world fallacy is not merely one bias among many. It is the psychological engine that powers the entire suite of biases previously identified. In a legal context, it means that the investigator, prosecutor, and jury may not merely be *mistaken* about what happened—they may be *psychologically motivated* to reject the accurate account, because accepting it would threaten their

fundamental belief that the world is orderly and that people get what they deserve. The systems thinker's account—which describes a world of interacting conditions, distributed causation, and probabilistic outcomes—is a direct threat to BJW. This makes it the account most likely to be rejected, regardless of its accuracy.

Keywords: just-world fallacy; belief in a just world; victim blaming; blame attribution; systems thinking; fundamental attribution error; legal psychology; accident investigation

Key Points

- The just-world fallacy (Lerner, 1980) is the belief that people get what they deserve—and it creates a powerful psychological need to assign blame when harm occurs
- This need operates *regardless of the evidence*: research shows observers will distort perceptions, derogate victims, and inflate blame specifically to preserve BJW
- The systems thinker’s account of an accident is a direct threat to BJW because it describes harm emerging from conditions, not choices—implying the world is not orderly
- BJW is the foundational mechanism beneath all previously identified biases: it explains why observers need simple causes, resist environmental explanations, and prefer dispositional blame
- The accused faces a double bind: the systemic account is rejected because it threatens BJW, but accepting false blame validates a narrative inconsistent with what actually happened
- Awareness of BJW is essential for justice because it reveals that resistance to the accurate account may be *motivated*, not merely mistaken

1 Introduction

1.1 The Deepest Layer

The prior papers in this series have identified an array of cognitive mechanisms that operate against the systems thinker in legal and investigative settings:

- The **fundamental attribution error** causes observers to overattribute behaviour to personality and underattribute it to environment (Ross, 1977; OMXUS, 2026d).

- **Psychological distance** causes temporally or spatially remote contributing factors to feel unreal (Trope & Liberman, 2010; OMXUS, 2026e).
- The **far-fetched heuristic** causes complex, multi-factor explanations to seem inherently less plausible (Schweizer, Goble, & Renn, 2022; OMXUS, 2026e).
- **Availability bias** causes vivid, immediate events to dominate over diffuse background causes (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973; OMXUS, 2026e).
- The preference for **conspiracy simplicity** causes simple narratives involving identifiable agents to feel more satisfying than systemic ones (Schweizer et al., 2022; OMXUS, 2026e).

Each of these mechanisms has been described as an independent cognitive process. But they share a common root. The present paper identifies that root: the **just-world fallacy**.

The just-world fallacy is not merely another bias to add to the list. It is the psychological engine that drives the entire suite. It explains *why* people resist systemic explanations. It explains *why* simple, agent-based narratives feel more satisfying. And it explains why the resistance to the systems thinker’s account is not merely cognitive but *motivational*—driven not by a failure of understanding but by a deep psychological need.

1.2 The Belief in a Just World

Melvin Lerner first proposed the just-world hypothesis in the 1960s after observing a pattern that troubled him: clinical psychologists—people he knew to be kind and educated—routinely blamed their patients for the patients’ own suffering (Lerner, 1980). Lerner’s students similarly disparaged people living in poverty, seemingly unaware of the structural forces that contribute to it.

Lerner went on to conduct a series of experiments demonstrating that when partici-

pants observed an innocent person suffering (for example, receiving electric shocks in what appeared to be a learning experiment), they did not simply feel sympathy. They *derogated* the victim—rating them as less likeable, less deserving, and less worthy of help—specifically when there was no prospect of the suffering ending (Lerner & Simmons, 1966).

This finding was counterintuitive. Why would observing innocent suffering make people think *worse* of the sufferer? Lerner’s explanation was that observing undeserved suffering threatens a fundamental psychological need: the belief that the world is orderly, predictable, and just. If innocent people can suffer for no reason, then you, too, might suffer for no reason. This is psychologically intolerable. To restore the belief in a just world, the observer has two options:

1. **Help the victim**, thereby restoring justice.
2. **Redefine the victim as deserving**, thereby restoring the belief that people get what they deserve.

When option 1 is not available—as is often the case for bystanders, jurors, and investigators—option 2 becomes the psychological default.

1.3 Relevance to the Legal Context

The relevance of BJW to the legal context is direct and profound. When serious harm has occurred—when someone has been injured or killed—the observer (investigator, prosecutor, juror) confronts a psychologically threatening situation: an innocent person has suffered. The just-world belief demands an explanation that preserves order. There are two possibilities:

- a) **The harm was caused by an identifiable agent who made a blameworthy choice.** This preserves BJW. The world remains just: the agent chose to do some-

thing wrong, and the consequence was deserved in the sense that it was caused by a volitional act. The appropriate response is punishment.

- b) **The harm was an accident—the product of interacting conditions, environmental factors, and probabilistic outcomes, without criminal intent.** This threatens BJW. If serious harm can occur without anyone intending it, without anyone being morally culpable, then the world is random. Anyone could be next. There is no one to punish, and punishment would serve no purpose.

The systems thinker’s account explicitly describes possibility (b). It describes a world in which harm emerges from conditions rather than choices, in which multiple factors interact to produce outcomes that no single individual intended or controlled, and in which the appropriate response is not punishment but prevention.

This is why the systems thinker’s account is not merely misunderstood. It is *psychologically threatening*. It is rejected not because it is inaccurate but because accepting it would require the observer to give up the belief that the world is just.

2 The Just-World Fallacy as the Foundation Beneath All Other Biases

2.1 Why Observers Need a Simple Cause

The far-fetched heuristic (Schweizer et al., 2022) causes multi-factor explanations to seem less plausible than simple ones. But *why* is simplicity preferred? The just-world fallacy provides the answer: a simple cause implies an identifiable agent. An identifiable agent implies a choice. A choice implies moral responsibility. And moral responsibility implies that the world is just—that the harm occurred because someone chose to cause it, not because the world is random.

A complex, multi-factor explanation denies all of this. If the harm resulted from the interaction of stress, fatigue, environmental unfamiliarity, and poor conditions, then there is no single choice, no single agent, and no clear moral responsibility. The world is not orderly; it is complex. The just-world belief is threatened.

The preference for simple causes is therefore not merely a cognitive shortcut. It is a motivated preference driven by the need to preserve BJW.

2.2 Why Observers Resist Environmental Explanations

The fundamental attribution error causes observers to overattribute behaviour to disposition and underattribute it to environment. But why should this be? One explanation is purely cognitive—people are attention-magnets and environments are backgrounds. But the just-world fallacy provides a deeper, *motivational* explanation: environmental explanations imply that the world is not under individual control. If behaviour is substantially shaped by environment—as the language acquisition data demonstrate (OMXUS, 2026a; mean $h = 0.93$)—then people are not fully autonomous agents whose outcomes reflect their choices. This is a direct threat to BJW.

Dispositional explanations, by contrast, preserve BJW perfectly. If the person caused harm because of who they are (careless, reckless, malicious), then the world is just: their character produced their outcome. The observer can feel safe, because *they* are not careless, reckless, or malicious, and therefore *they* would not produce such an outcome.

This is the psychological mechanism beneath the FAE: it is not merely a cognitive error but a motivated distortion in the service of just-world belief.

2.3 Why Observers Prefer Dispositional Blame

Blame serves multiple psychological functions, all of which are rooted in BJW:

- **Control:** If harm is caused by an agent’s choice, then I can avoid harm by making better choices. The world is controllable.
- **Predictability:** If harm is caused by bad character, I can predict who will cause harm and avoid them. The world is orderly.
- **Justice:** If harm is caused by a blameworthy act, then punishment is appropriate and will restore the moral order. The world is just.
- **Safety:** If harm requires someone to *choose* to cause it, then I am safe as long as no one around me makes that choice. The world is not random.

The systems thinker’s account denies every one of these satisfactions. It says: the harm resulted from conditions, not choices; you cannot avoid it simply by being a good person; it was not predictable from any individual’s character; punishment will not prevent recurrence; and you are not safe merely because you would never “choose” to cause such harm, because the person involved didn’t choose it either.

This is why the systems account feels not merely wrong but *dangerous*. Accepting it means accepting that you live in a world where serious harm can happen to you, or through you, without anyone being at fault. Most people cannot tolerate this. BJW demands that someone be at fault.

3 The Double Bind

The just-world fallacy creates a double bind for the accused person, particularly when they are a systems thinker.

If they provide the systemic account (which is accurate), it is rejected because it threatens BJW. The observer hears excuses, evasion, and an absence of remorse. The observer’s just-world belief reinterprets the account: the mention of relationship stress

becomes motive; the identification of multiple factors becomes deflection; the analytical tone becomes callousness; the prevention-oriented language becomes premeditation (OMXUS, 2026d).

If they accept blame (which is inaccurate), this satisfies BJW perfectly. The observer can now construct a just narrative: the person did something wrong, they acknowledge it, and punishment is appropriate. The world is orderly. But the accused has now validated a false narrative—one that attributes intent where there was none, and culpability where there was accident.

If they show distress and remorse without accepting blame, this is interpreted through BJW as guilt that has not yet been confessed. The observer thinks: why would they be so upset if they weren't responsible?

If they remain calm and analytical, this is interpreted through BJW as indifference—proof that they are the kind of person who could cause harm without caring.

There is no communicative strategy that overcomes BJW from the accused person's side. Every possible response is filtered through the observer's need to believe that the world is just and that someone is to blame.

4 Empirical Evidence for BJW in Blame and Legal Contexts

4.1 Lerner's Foundational Experiments

Lerner and Simmons (1966) demonstrated that observers who watched an innocent person receive electric shocks rated the victim as less attractive and less deserving of help—specifically when there was no possibility of the suffering ending. The observers were not cruel people. They were ordinary participants engaging in a psychological defence

mechanism: if the victim is suffering, and I cannot help, then the victim must deserve it. This preserved their belief in a just world.

4.2 Accident Contexts

Research by Walster (1966) and subsequent work demonstrated that observers assign greater responsibility to accident victims—and to accident perpetrators—when the consequences of the accident are more severe. This is logically incoherent: the severity of an outcome cannot change the degree of fault that preceded it. But it is psychologically coherent under BJW: severe outcomes demand greater blame to justify the greater suffering. The worse the harm, the more blameworthy the person must be—because the world is just, and severe consequences must be deserved.

Connors, Ranish, and Maisto (1982) demonstrated this specifically in traffic accident contexts: observers attributed greater responsibility when the accident produced serious injury, regardless of the actual fault involved. This has direct implications for cases where accidental harm produces severe outcomes: the severity of the harm itself becomes, psychologically, evidence of the person’s culpability.

4.3 Victim Blaming and Character Derogation

Correia, Vala, and Aguiar (2001) found that individuals with stronger just-world beliefs were more likely to engage in secondary victimisation—blaming, devaluing, or minimising the suffering of innocent victims—and to judge victims as more deserving of their fate. This pattern held even when the victim was objectively innocent.

The mechanism generalises to the accused in an accident. If the accused is associated with severe harm, BJW demands that they be “the kind of person” who would cause such harm. Their character is derogated to match the outcome. The systems thinker’s analytical, contextual, prevention-oriented account is incompatible with this derogation—

and is therefore rejected in favour of a narrative that makes the accused a worse person, because only a worse person could have caused such severe harm in a just world.

4.4 The Juror Context

Kerr and Kurtz (1977) demonstrated that mock jurors' verdicts were influenced by the severity of the victim's suffering, independent of the evidence of the defendant's fault. Jurors were more likely to convict when the victim suffered more—not because the evidence was stronger, but because BJW demanded greater punishment for greater suffering.

Rubin and Peplau's survey research found that individuals with strong just-world beliefs also tended to be more authoritarian, more conservative, more likely to admire existing social institutions, and more likely to hold negative attitudes toward underprivileged groups. This suggests that BJW is not an isolated bias but part of a broader dispositional orientation that favours order, hierarchy, and individual responsibility over systemic explanation.

5 The Just-World Fallacy and the OMXUS Framework

5.1 The Irony of the Lock

The security expenditure evidence (OMXUS, 2026b) reveals a deep irony when read through the lens of BJW. Every person who buys a lock has implicitly acknowledged that harm can come from systemic conditions—a stranger's desperation, illness, or circumstance—rather than from that stranger's innate character. The lock does not discriminate between “good” and “bad” people. It treats harm as a systemic probability, not a moral certainty.

Yet the same person who buys the lock may, when serving as a juror, demand that harm

be attributed to character rather than circumstance. Their purchasing behaviour accepts the systemic account. Their psychological need rejects it.

This contradiction is explained by BJW: the lock is purchased unconsciously, as a practical response to a practical risk. It does not threaten BJW because it operates below the level of conscious moral reasoning. But in the courtroom, the question of “why did this happen?” is explicitly moral, and BJW demands a moral answer: it happened because someone is to blame.

5.2 The Irony of European Peace

The European integration evidence (OMXUS, 2026c) reveals the same irony at continental scale. For a thousand years, European nations operated on a just-world logic of interstate relations: if a nation was attacked, it must have been weak or provocative; if it was defeated, it must have deserved defeat. Wars were understood through the lens of blame—which nation was at fault, which leader was culpable.

What ended the cycle of warfare was not a better assignment of blame. It was a systemic intervention: economic integration that changed the conditions which produced conflict. The systems account—“war results from structural incentives, not from national character”—was the account that produced 80 years of peace.

The blame account—“war results from bad actors”—was the account that produced a thousand years of cyclical violence.

5.3 The Irony of Language

The language acquisition evidence (OMXUS, 2026a) demonstrates that the most complex human behaviour is environmentally determined. No one applies BJW to language: no one believes that a child in Tokyo speaks Japanese because they “deserve” to, or that a

child in Sydney speaks English because of their character. The environmental explanation is accepted as obvious.

But for other behaviours—aggression, risk-taking, error, accident—BJW reasserts itself. The same person who would never claim that language is deserved will insist that an accident was caused by the person’s character rather than their circumstances. BJW operates selectively: it applies to outcomes that threaten the observer’s sense of safety, and it is suspended for outcomes that do not.

6 Implications for Justice

1. **BJW is a motivated bias, not merely a cognitive error.** This distinction matters. A cognitive error can be corrected with information. A motivated bias resists correction because the person *needs* the distortion. Investigators and jurors may resist the systems thinker’s account not because they fail to understand it but because accepting it would threaten their psychological equilibrium. Training must address not only the intellectual content of systemic causation but the emotional resistance to it.
2. **Severity of harm should not influence attribution of fault.** BJW causes observers to attribute greater blame when harm is more severe. This is logically incoherent—the severity of an outcome cannot change the degree of fault that preceded it—but it is psychologically powerful. Legal professionals should be explicitly trained to separate severity from culpability.
3. **The double bind must be acknowledged.** The systems thinker cannot satisfy BJW without accepting a false narrative. Defence counsel should be prepared to explain this dynamic to a court: the accused’s refusal to accept blame is not evidence of guilt. It is evidence of accuracy. The person is declining to validate a narrative they know to be false, even though they know it is the narrative the listener wants to hear.

4. **Expert testimony on BJW should be considered admissible.** When a jury is evaluating an account that describes accidental, multi-factor, environmentally influenced harm, expert testimony explaining the operation of BJW may help jurors distinguish between their psychological *need* for blame and the *evidence* for blame. These are not the same thing.
5. **The systems-thinking orientation should be understood in context.** A person who naturally thinks in systems is not avoiding blame. They are applying the same cognitive framework that has produced aviation safety, public health prevention, organisational resilience, and European peace. Their orientation is toward understanding and preventing harm—the opposite of the orientation that BJW attributes to them.
6. **The locked door test.** A useful heuristic for legal professionals: would this juror buy a lock? If yes, they have already accepted the premise that harm can arise from conditions rather than character. The question is whether they can apply the same logic in the courtroom that they apply at the hardware store.

7 Limitations

1. The just-world fallacy is a well-established psychological construct with extensive empirical support, but its specific operation in the legal evaluation of systems-oriented accident accounts has not been tested in controlled experimental designs.
2. BJW interacts with other variables including political orientation, religious belief, culture, and individual personality. The present paper treats BJW as a general mechanism; individual variation is substantial.
3. The claim is not that all observers are equally susceptible to BJW, or that BJW always determines legal outcomes. It is that BJW creates a systematic pressure toward blame attribution that operates independently of, and sometimes contrary

to, the evidence.

4. This paper does not argue that blame is never appropriate. It argues that when blame is motivated by BJW rather than supported by evidence, it ceases to be justice and becomes a psychological defence mechanism.

8 Conclusions

The just-world fallacy is the deepest layer of the psychological structure that operates against the systems thinker in legal and investigative contexts. It is the reason why all the other biases identified in this series—the fundamental attribution error, psychological distance, the far-fetched heuristic, availability bias, conspiracy simplicity—are so resistant to correction. They are not merely cognitive errors. They are in the service of a deep psychological need: the need to believe that the world is orderly, that people get what they deserve, and that severe harm is caused by blameworthy conduct.

The systems thinker’s account of an accident—describing interacting conditions, environmental influences, distributed causation, and probabilistic outcomes—is a direct assault on this belief. It describes a world in which serious harm can occur without anyone being morally culpable. It describes a world in which the observer, too, could be involved in accidental harm, regardless of their character. It describes a world that is complex, interconnected, and not fully controllable.

This is why the systems account is rejected. Not because it is wrong. Because it is threatening.

Lerner (1980) himself recognised the implications: “the sight of an innocent person suffering without possibility of reward or compensation motivated people to devalue the attractiveness of the victim in order to bring about a more appropriate fit between her fate and her character.” The same mechanism, applied to the accused in an accidental harm case, produces the inverse: the sight of serious harm without an identifiable villain

motivates observers to inflate the culpability of the person closest to the event, in order to bring about a more appropriate fit between the outcome and a blameworthy agent.

This is not justice. It is a psychological defence mechanism dressed in legal clothing.

Every locked door proves that the person behind it already lives in a world where harm arises from conditions, not just from choices. The just-world fallacy is the refusal to acknowledge in the courtroom what the hardware store has already confirmed: that the world is interconnected, that circumstances produce outcomes, and that sometimes, the most accurate account of what happened is the one that no one wants to hear.

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