

## PECULIARITIES OF PRISONERS` REPRESENTATIONS OF A JUST WORLD<sup>1</sup>

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### ОСОБЕННОСТИ ПРЕДСТАВЛЕНИЙ ЗАКЛЮЧЕННЫХ О СПРАВЕДЛИВОМ МИРЕ

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**Summary.** The aim of the research was to study prisoners` (N=100) social representations of a just world by developing three factor model of social representations of justice that includes moral, legal and interpersonal justice. The results of the research revealed that among prisoner`s social representations of a just world dominate the factors of interpersonal and moral justice; in turn, legal justice as the indicator of a just world depends on the type of offence and subjective sense of guilt; those respondents, who do not plead themselves guilty, feel the shortage of justice in legal direction, wherewith, the necessity for restoration of legal justice in the perception of a just world arises.

**Key words:** prisoners, justice, social representations, just world.

**Аннотация.** Целью данного исследования является изучение социальных представлений заключенных (N=100) о справедливом мире путем создания трехфакторной модели представлений о справедливости, которая включает в себя моральную, правовую и межличностную справедливость. Результаты исследования показали, что в социальных представлениях заключенных о справедливом мире доминируют факторы межличностной и моральной справедливости. В свою очередь, правовая справедливость, как показатель справедливого мира, зависит от вида преступления и субъективной оценки своей вины. Респонденты, которые не признают свою вину в совершенном преступлении, чувствуют недостаток справедливости в правовой сфере, в связи с чем присутствует необходимость возобновления правовой справедливости в восприятии ими справедливого мира.

**Ключевые слова:** заключенные, справедливость, представления, справедливый мир.

Security is one of the stability indicators that includes both social material warrants of security, and legal and moral security. One of the basic security problems is the level of crime and recidivism in the country. The representatives of various social sciences should be involved in the research, causal analysis and prevention of consequences of this problem, paying specific attention not only to the economical causes, but also to socio-psychological regularities and problems that are associated with the isolation from society. Clemmer [3, p. 552], one of the first researchers on prison, stated that the more time a person spends in prison, the more he or she withdraws from conventional values and acceptable behaviour; thus, imprisonment and prisionalization is a destructive process; as a result, imprisonment as a form of punishment does not always have the effect of reduction of the level of crime and recidivism; in the contrary, it contributes to the recidivism and the choice of antisocial behaviour after the release. Several authors [16; 8 et al.] highlight that prisons provoke the risk of recidivism because proportionally convicts are former prisoners [7]. Imprisonment contributes to the individual`s withdrawal from society, inability to adopt to the norms of society reinforcing the tendencies of antisocial behaviour, thus extending the range of rejection.

Detention changes essentially individual`s perception of surrounding events, disarranges everyday life course, determines individual`s adaptation to absolutely

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new, unknown conditions during the first imprisonment. Moreover, long-term isolation hinders one's communication with relatives, limits one's opportunities to adapt in a society after the release from the prison. Researches on psychological consequences of imprisonment revealed that imprisonment can be too cruel, humiliating and disruptive experience for many people [2, p. 336]. Individuals are considered to be psychologically exhausted after imprisonment; moreover, discussions on prison subculture suggest that a prison not only does not contribute to positive changes in a personality, but, on the contrary, also develops criminal tendencies and accustoms to the certain life style [3, p. 558]. Respectively, imprisonment has a psychologically destructive nature that contributes to the individual's demoralization, degrades legal cognition fostering hostility towards legal institutions and disrespect to legal norms, distorts communication skills, thus expanding the risk of social rejection. All these aspects make further resocialization difficult and frequently lead to repeated antisocial behaviour.

One of the components of moral and legal cognition is justice that determines the efficiency of the interaction process between an individual and society and consideration of social norms; in turn, individual's representations of justice influence his or her attitude to legal norms, moral principles and terms of interpersonal relations, thus enforcing the choice of socially accepted behaviour in everyday life. Therefore in the framework of the present research the representations of a just world have been studied in the context of legal, moral and interpersonal justice. In sum, the problems of researches on justice are reflected in the context of various sciences. The research of this phenomenon in psychology began in the 60's on the basis of Kohlberg's [11] theory of moral development and Adams's [1] theory of equal justices. Currently the researches on justice have a multidimensional nature [4; 5; 9; 10; 13; 15; 18; 19; 20 et al.] that impedes unitary understanding of this concept. For a better understanding of this phenomenon the present research used an approach that concerns general representations of justice [9; 10; 13; 14; 17] that involves the understanding and perception of justice in everyday life, associative links and individual differences in representations on the basis of a just world theory [4; 12 et al.]. It should be noted that researches on a just world revealed the level of belief that events are mostly just and people get what they deserve; and one of the aims of this research is to study the representations of a just world to reveal the content and conceptual part of this notion.

### **The aim of the research**

The aim of the research was to study prisoners' (N=100) peculiarities of representations of a just world in Daugavgrivas prison (Latvia) developing three factor model of social representations of justice. Several issues were raised: a) what is the content of social representations of a just world among the prisoners; b) are there any differences in the content of social representations of a just world depending on prisoners' level of education, criminal career, the type of offense and the assessment of a subjective guilt; c) what is the level of prisoners' belief in justice and a just world.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

100 prisoners within the age group from 18 to 52 (M=32,5; SD=8,4) from Daugavgrivas prison (Latvia) took part in the research. It was determined that according to prisoner's level of education 43 % did not completed or have only compulsory education, 57 % have secondary or vocational education. Participants' marital status analysis revealed that 28 % have a spouse and 72 % are single; in turn, 66 % have parents and 34 % of participants are parentless. The analysis of prisoners' criminal experience revealed that 19 % have the first criminal record, 20 % have 2-3

– criminal records, 31 % – 4–5 records, and more than 5 criminal records have 30 % of participants. According to the type of offence, 33 % of prisoners are sentenced for violent crimes – homicide, crimes against health, morality, 36 % of participants – for crimes against property (robbery, burglary), and the rest 31 % for offences connected with hooliganism, breach of general order, smuggling, corruption, road safety violations, distribution of drugs. 59 % of prisoners had the first criminal record before the age of 18, 22 % from the age of 18 to 23, after the age of 24–19 % of participants. According to the overall time spend in prison, 22 % have spent less than 3 years, 46 % of prisoners – 4 to 10 years, more than 10 years in prison have spent 32 % of participants. Moreover, it was found that 76 % of prisoners plead themselves guilty for crimes they are sentenced for; only 24 % do not plead themselves guilty for crimes they have committed. Only 25 % of participants consider their punishment as just, 38 % state it was unjust.

### **Procedure and instruments**

Participants were offered to fill in the questionnaire that included the general part – questions about age, the level of education, marital status, the type of offence last sentenced for, the age of the first criminal record, overall time spent in imprisonment, and the period of time since the last imprisonment. One question touched on the subjective admission of guilt.

In the second part the participants were asked to range the indicators of a just world on the basis of their representations of a just world; at first, in three rows reflecting three different factors that are conditionally labelled as *interpersonal justice*, *legal justice*, *moral justice*, where the indicator that is assessed as the highest parameter of a just world gets rank 3, and then, indicators were ranged within the framework of each factor from 1 to 7, where the highest rank is 7 and it has the indicator that the participant assesses as the highest. The assessment of factors is gained summarizing the values of corresponding indicators.

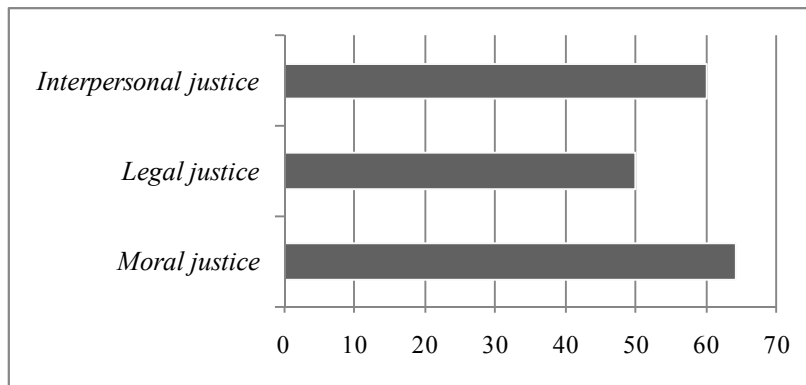
The third part of a questionnaire included questions that consider the belief in justice and a just world, the assessment of punishment justice, subjective satisfaction with life, the level of penitence for committed crime; all these issues were assessed according to the 7 grade scale, one question was oriented to the personal perception of oneself as a just person.

## **RESULTS**

Before the consideration of the responses on the first question, the attention should be paid to the content of social representations of a just world that includes three factors: interpersonal justice (F1), legal justice (F2) and moral justice (F3) (see Figure 1).

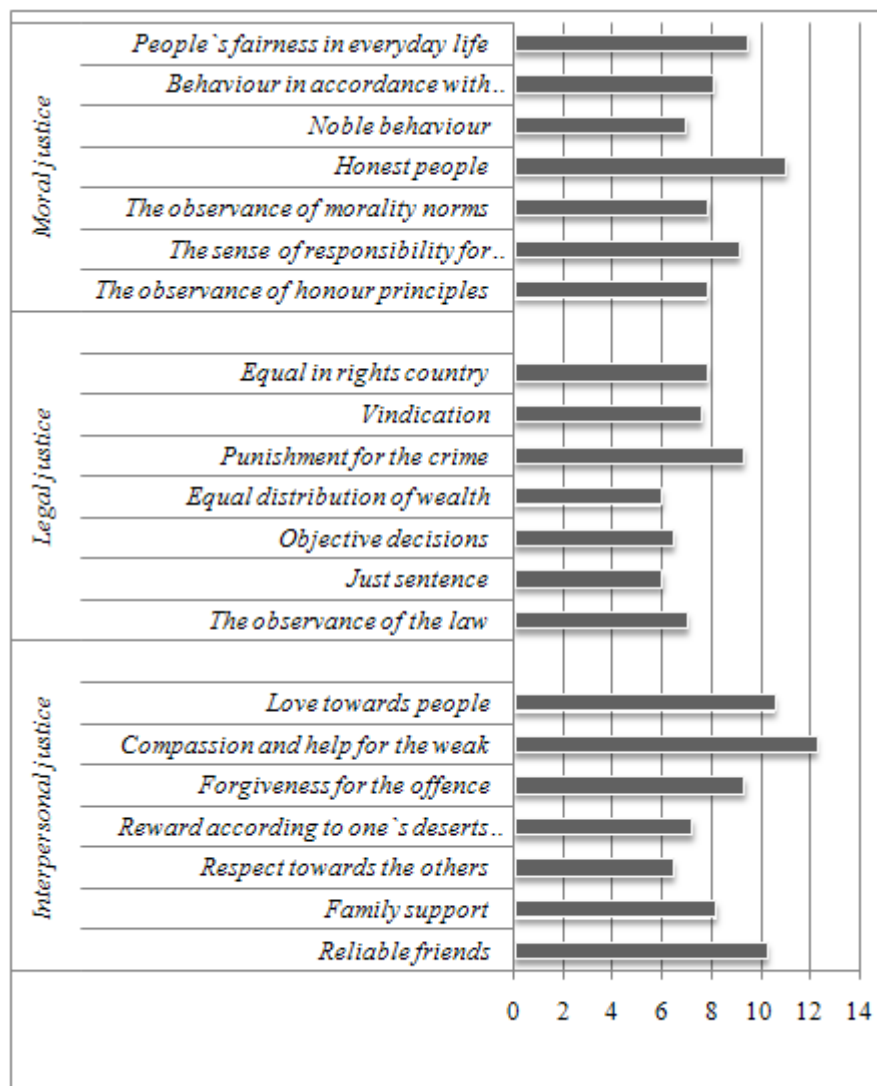
The conformity of the factor assessment distribution revealed that it does not differ significantly from the normal distribution (One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test,  $p(F1)=0,648$ ,  $p(F2)=0,665$ ,  $p(F3)=0,573$ ).

Statistically significant difference between the assessment of factors was found (*Paired Samples Test*,  $p<0,05$ ). Respondents assessed *Moral justice* as the highest; the lowest – *Legal justice* that potentially indicates that researched social group does not perceive the legal indicators as parameters of a just world that largely determines the negative attitude towards the law enforcement institutions and disbelief in legal procedure as well as a deficient development of legal cognition.



**Figure 1. Respondents` assessment of just world factors**

The examination of the results in Figure 2 gives more detailed analysis of the assessment of indicators of each factor. Respondents gave the highest assessment for Interpersonal justice indicators – family support, reliable friends, love towards people; in turn, the lowest assessment have the indicators of the second factor (legal justice) – punishment for the crime, vindication, equal distribution of wealth.



**Figure 2. Respondents` assessment of separate indicators**

Overall, according to the distribution of indicators the F1 factor (interpersonal justice) was assessed as the highest, F3factor (moral justice) was assessed at an

average level, F2 (legal justice) was assessed as the lowest; these differences are statistically significant (Paired Samples Test,  $p < 0,05$ ).

The one factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) with subsequent Multiple Comparisons was used for the research to answer the second research question - are there any differences in the content of social representations of a just world depending on prisoners' level of education, criminal career, the type of offense and the assessment of a subjective guilt.

The evaluation of the influence of the level of education on the assessment of factors revealed that respondents' level of education influences the assessment of the F3 factor (ANOVA,  $F=3,413$ ,  $p=0,021$ ).

Moreover, this factor was assessed higher than average and, in all, as the highest in the group of respondents with the compulsory education. This assessment significantly differs from the respondents with uncompleted compulsory education ( $p=0,005$ ) and secondary education ( $p=0,014$ ) who assessed this factor lower.

The analysis of the influence of the criminal career on the assessment of just world factors revealed that the age of the first trial influences the F3 factor (ANOVA,  $F=3,693$ ,  $p=0,028$ ). Those respondents who were put to trial for the first time at the age from 18 to 23 assessed this factor lower than average and, in all, as the lowest. There is a statistically significant difference between this group of respondents and other groups that were put to trial for the first time before the age of 18 ( $p=0,012$ ) or after 24 ( $p=0,030$ ). These differences can be possibly explained by the fact that until the age of 18 representations of moral justice are still not established and moral values are perceived more idealized from the point of view of juvenile maximalism, and during the imprisonment authorities play a great role in forming the representations of values and norms; in turn, after the age of 24 a personality has achieved certain maturity level and behaves on the basis of moral principles. Getting into a prison at the age from 18 to 24, the individual is aware of the consequences of his or her behaviour and commits the crime on purpose; it is likely influenced by the low level of moral development, thus, the factor of moral justice with its structural indicators is assessed lower.

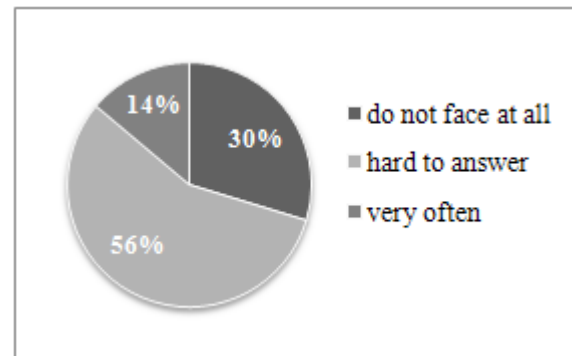
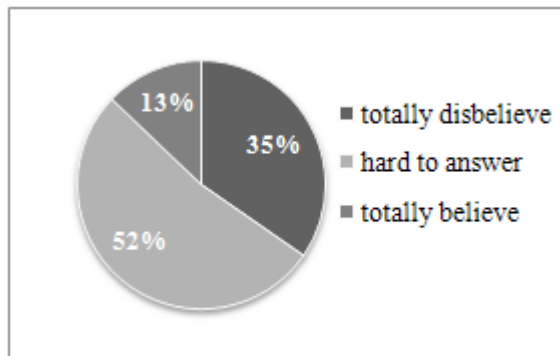
The analysis of the assessment of factors according to the type of offence revealed a statistically significant differences for the F2 factor (ANOVA,  $F=6,258$ ,  $p=0,003$ ).

Respondents that were sentenced for violent crimes (homicide, grievous bodily harm) assessed the factor of legal justice as an indicator of just world much higher than those respondents that were sentenced for less serious crimes as hooliganism or the use (distribution) of drugs, within this group legal justice has the lowest assessment that is lower than average. Such differences can be potentially explained by the fact that respondents, that are sentenced for violent crimes, more frequently get more severe punishment and more rarely consider their punishment as just, thus they see the necessity for legal justice that they lack in personal life. In turn, those offenders, who are sentenced for hooliganism or the use of drugs, more frequently plead themselves guilty and acknowledge their offence, as these offences harm not so much the society as themselves and the level of their legal cognition is likely to be higher than of those offenders that are capable of violent crimes.

The fact that respondents plead themselves guilty in the crime they are sentenced for influenced the assessment of the F2 factor. Those prisoners who do not plead themselves guilty (Independent Samples Test,  $p=0,004$ ) assessed the legal justice factor as the highest, thus considering themselves as the victims of legal institutions.

The explanation for such perception of legal justice can be found in the circumstance that social representations of a just world anticipate the individual's opinion on what must this world be like to be called just, what indicators form the

representations of a just world; thus, if this group of respondents do not plead themselves guilty, they consider themselves to be the victims of legal system and believe they have been treated unjust; in a just world it should be otherwise, the legal system should reflect justice, that is why legal justice in this group forms the essence of representations of a just world. Such point of view does not reflect a high level of respondents` legal cognition, but provides their vision on how should they be treated by law enforcement institutions to arouse the belief in a just world.



**Figure 3. Do you believe that world in general is just (assess to what degree)?** **Figure 4. Please assess, how often do you face justice in life?**

The results from the responses on the third question showed that the level of respondents` belief that a world in general is just is relatively low, only 13% of respondents claimed that they believe in this statement, in turn, 33% absolutely rejected such possibility (see Figure 3).

Moreover, 30% of respondents claimed that they do not face justice in their life at all and only 14% stated that justice in their life is rather a condition than exception (see Figure 4).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Only a part of the research results is reviewed within the framework of this article that does not allow to make ultimate conclusions and bring forward specific motions concerning the use of these results for the organization of preventive measures and improvement of the efficiency of prisoners` resocialization processes. However, these results allow to make a conclusion that representations of justice reflect the level of individual`s moral and legal cognition that determines his or her behaviour and motivation to follow social norms and the law; moreover, the representations of a just world are influenced by the individual`s perception of justice, the level of belief in justice, life experience (including criminal), and the society with its attitude and behaviour against the socially unprotected risk groups that often leads the representatives of socially rejected groups to the loss of the belief in justice and distorted perception of justice. Concerning the content of the social representations of a just world, on the basis of the research results it can be stated that it is based on the three factor model that is formed by the indicators of interpersonal justice, legal justice and moral justice. During the research it was found that prisoners` representations perceive the just world as the result of moral and interpersonal justice, however, such representations depend largely on the type of offence and the subjective sense of guilt; the necessity to restore legal justice in the

ideal just world arises due to the lack of personal justice. However, these results do not allow to state so far that certain part of respondents believe that a just world is legal, therefore everyone must follow the law; it is more a signal that there is a deviation in the legal justice that allows prisoners partially justify their behaviour by putting blame on the lack of justice in the legal procedure.

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