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People Who Believe in Justice Also See a Victim's Life as More Meaningful After Tragedy

Seeing bad things happen to other people is scary. One way to respond to this is to blame the victim to look for some reason why it happened to them. But there's another common response, according to a new study published in Psychological Science, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science. The researchers found that people who believe in justice in the world also believe that a tragedy gives the victim's life more meaning.

"A lot of the time when people see someone else suffering, and helping them isn't an option, people will instead justify the fact that something negative is happening to them. Because it's scary for something negative to happen to a good person that means it could happen to you," says Joanna E. Anderson of the University of Waterloo, who cowrote the study with her colleagues Aaron C. Kay and Gráinne M. Fitzsimons. Anderson suspected that there was another way to feel better about someone else's tragic experience: to believe that the negative experience is balanced by positive outcomes.

In an experiment, volunteers read a scenario in which someone was injured playing soccer in high school. The soccer player ends up with a broken leg, has back problems, undergoes multiple surgeries, and can't go to school with their peers. Everything is resolved by the end of high school; in the scenario, the person is now happily married and is thinking about starting a family. Each volunteer also filled out a survey that determined how strong their "justice motive" is their need to see the world as just or fair. Then they were asked how much meaning they think the person's life has.

People who had a strong need to see the world as just were more likely to say that a victim's life is meaningful as opposed to the life of a person who hasn't experienced a tragedy. This also held true in another experiment, in which the researchers manipulated the participants' feelings about justice by having them read an article about how CEOs make a lot of money, but are hired because of personal connections rather than merit. The people who'd read about undeserving CEOs had a stronger justice motive and were more likely to see the injured soccer player's later life as meaningful.

The results show that people who have a strong need to believe the world is fair may be motivated to find positive outcomes "silver linings" from tragedies. "I think that this is probably a more positive reaction" than blaming the victim, Anderson says. "But I do think that either reaction shows that you're focusing so much on yourself and your own need to make sure that this can't happen to you that you're not really thinking about the other person at all."

Joanna E. Anderson, Aaron C. Kay and Gráinne M. Fitzsimons. In Search of the Silver Lining: The Justice Motive Fosters Perceptions of Benefits in the Later Lives of Tragedy Victim. Psychological Science.