Being a good or a just teacher: Which experiences of teachers' behavior can be more predictive of school bullying?

Matthias Donat1 | Michel Knigge2 | Claudia Dalbert1

1 Department of Educational Psychology, Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg, Halle/Saale, Germany
2 Department of Educational Sciences, University of Potsdam, Potsdam, Germany

Correspondence
Dr. Matthias Donat, Department of Educational Psychology, Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg, Franckeplatz 1, D-06099 Halle/Saale, Germany.
Email: matthias.donat@paedagogik.uni-halle.de

In two cross-sectional questionnaire studies with N = 2,931 German students, aged between 12 and 17 years (M = 14.1, SD = 0.5), we investigated the relation between students' bullying behavior and their personal belief in a just world (BJW). We considered students' personal experience of teacher justice as a possible mediator in this relation and investigated whether the students' experiences of their teachers' classroom management explained bullying behavior in addition to personal BJW and teacher justice, while statistically controlling for sex and school type. In both studies, multilevel modeling results showed that the more students endorsed personal BJW and the more they evaluated their teachers' behavior toward them personally as being just, the less likely they were to report that they bullied others. The students' personal experience of teacher justice mediated the association of personal BJW with bullying. Furthermore, the students' personal experience of classroom management significantly predicted bullying in addition to personal BJW and teacher justice. The observed relations were mainly significant at the individual level. The pattern of results persisted when we controlled for school type and when we considered student sex as a moderator. We discussed the adaptive functions of BJW and implications for future school research and practice.

KEYWORDS
belief in a just world, bullying behavior, classroom management, multilevel modeling, teacher justice

1 INTRODUCTION

Bullying represents a form of unjust1 and deviant behavior as bullying perpetrators break school rules and societal norms and violate the personal rights of victimized students, who undeservingly suffer from the negative consequences of such behavior. Thus, bullying should clearly be explainable by individual differences in the need to behave justly, that is, the belief in a just world (BJW; Lerner, 1980). Researchers have shown that the more students endorsed BJW, the less likely they reported that they bullied others (Correia & Dalbert, 2008; Donat, Umlauf, Dalbert, & Kamble, 2012). In our studies, we aimed to replicate and to extend these findings.

To date, little seems to be known about the importance of teachers' day-to-day behavior with regard to bullying. Hence, it seems important to investigate this factor. Some studies support the idea that bullying occurs less frequently the more positive (e.g., Roland & Galloway, 2002) and the more just (Donat et al., 2012) students evaluate their teachers' behavior as being. We aimed to investigate the unique effects of these experiences on students' bullying behavior when considered simultaneously. Researchers have just started to pay more attention to a multilevel view on bullying behavior. Therefore, we further aimed to examine the extent to which students' personal experiences of their teachers' behavior or the average experience of all students in a class predicted bullying behavior.
2 | BULLYING

Bullying is acknowledged to be a common and widespread form of violence in schools in many countries (Smith, Morita et al., 1999). In his pioneering work, Olweus (1978) defined bullying as a school-specific subtype of aggressive behavior in which an aggressor intentionally and repeatedly harms another student either physically and/or psychologically for extended periods of time by exploiting her or his superior strength and power (Olweus, 1993). The first large-scale studies (for a review, see Olweus, 1993) in Norway and Sweden showed that bullying was pervasive in the school environment. These findings were confirmed for many other European countries (Smith, Madsen, & Moody, 1999) and beyond (e.g., Due & Holstein, 2008). Prevalence rates from international studies showed that about 4–20 percent of the examined students could be identified as perpetrators (for a review, see Smith, 2014). Moreover, boys tend to be involved more often in bullying episodes than girls as both perpetrators and victimized students (for a review, see Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010). Therefore, we considered sex as a moderator in our studies.

Olweus (1993) originally distinguished between three roles that students adopt in bullying situations: perpetrators, students who are victimized, and followers of the perpetrator (i.e., those who do not start the bullying episode but participate in it). Further, bullying has been shown to have detrimental consequences for victimized students (e.g., Due et al., 2005), perpetrators (e.g., Rigby & Slee, 1993), and students who were both (e.g., Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003). In this study, we focus on the central role of the perpetrator because she or he typically initiates episodes of bullying, seeks by means of aggression to achieve personal benefits, such as leadership within a group (Gini, 2006), and exploits her or his superior strength and power.

Bullying can be understood in terms of a group process (e.g., Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996) in which the vast majority of the students in a class are involved by taking on different roles. However, researchers have just started to investigate bullying from the perspective of different levels (i.e., individual level, class level). Wei, Williams, Chen, and Chang (2010) and Khoury-Kassabri (2012) showed significant variations in bullying between classes, but the amount of between-class variance differed widely (3–15%), suggesting that the individual variance accounted for most of the variance in bullying. Still, it seemed to be worth investigating bullying using a multilevel approach.

Researchers have developed many programs to prevent and/or intervene in bullying (for a review, see Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010; Smith, 2014). Many of these programs were inspired by Olweus’ (1997) bullying prevention program dealing with bullying behavior at different levels (i.e., school level, class level, student level). In line with these programs, teachers’ behavior seems important to bullying prevention as they are responsible for making non-aggressive class rules and enforcing them, improving monitoring during school breaks, creating a pleasant learning environment, and acting as important models of non-aggressive behavior for the students (Olweus, 1997). At times, bullying seems to be ignored or trivialized by teachers (Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000; Ellis & Shute, 2007; Olweus, 2011), and such behavior might be especially hurtful and probably unjust for students.

3 | CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

From our point of view, researchers have paid little attention to the significance of teachers’ day-to-day behavior (i.e., their classroom management) and students’ experiences of such behavior for their bullying behavior. Teachers’ behavior, however, seems central as frequent bullying has been shown to be related to factors such as punitive disciplinary methods, a disorganized classroom, and low-quality classroom instructions (for a review, see Allen, 2010). According to Roland and Galloway (2002), classroom management includes “many interrelated aspects of teacher-pupil interactions” (p. 300) which can be subsumed under four central dimensions: caring, teaching, monitoring, and intervention. Caring means that teachers, for example, help their students if they have problems; teaching is about teachers’ competence in explaining subject matter; monitoring concerns whether teachers keep an eye on their students’ activities and behavior during lessons and breaks; intervention means how teachers react when their students’ behavior is not acceptable. Roland and Galloway (2002) showed that students’ bullying behavior was negatively correlated with their evaluation of their teachers’ classroom management. These findings were replicated in other studies on teachers’ monitoring (Idsoe, Solli, & Cosmovici, 2008; Khoury-Kassabri, 2012); studies on teachers’ support seem to be mixed (Idsoe et al., 2008; Khoury-Kassabri, 2012; Natvig, Albrektsen, & Qvarnström, 2001; Wei et al., 2010).

Roland and Galloway (2002) did not apply a multilevel approach to investigate the extent to which the relation between classroom management and bullying behavior can be explained by individual experiences within classes or by average experiences between classes. Thus, it seemed to be important to investigate this relation within a multilevel framework that allows effects to be estimated separately at the individual and the class level. Although indicators of classroom management have been shown to be important for student bullying behavior in multilevel studies (Konishi, Hymel, Zumbo, & Li, 2010; Wei et al., 2010), they were only considered as individual-level factors. It may be assumed that if individual students were asked to assess their teachers’ classroom management, this measurement would include both an objective component and a more subjective component. Consequently, we expected a negative relation between classroom management and bullying behavior to be more likely at the class level than at the individual level.

4 | TEACHER JUSTICE

Bullying researchers have just started to pay more attention to students’ experiences of justice. This is somewhat surprising given that justice can be seen as a key issue in schools. Students want to be treated justly by their teachers and consider justice to be one of the most important attributes of a good teacher (Hofer, Pekrun,
Zielinski, 1986). Teachers describe themselves as justice-oriented people who care about the justice of important decisions, such as the grades they award (Kanders, 2000). Dalbert and Stoeber (2006) defined teacher justice as students’ individually and subjectively experienced justice of their teachers’ behavior toward them personally (‘they-to-me approach’; Peter & Dalbert, 2010). According to the group value theory (Lind & Tyler, 1988), teacher justice signals to students that they are esteemed members of the class and the school community and are socially included. In line with this reasoning, teacher justice has been shown to be positively related to students’ feeling of belonging to their school (Umlauft, Dalbert, & Schröpper, 2013). Students who felt justly treated by their teachers were more likely to accept and observe school rules and norms and even generalized this acceptance and observance to institutions outside school, such as the law, the police, and the judiciary (Gouveia-Pereira, Vala, Palmonari, & Rubini, 2003; Sanches, Gouveia-Pereira, & Carugati, 2012), and were thus less likely to bully others (Donat et al., 2012). Adolescents who did not accept these rules and norms typically showed deviant behavior at school (Emler & Reicher, 1987). In sum, teacher justice strengthens the feeling of belonging to school and the acceptance of rules and norms at school and even outside. Thus, we expected that teacher justice would be negatively correlated with bullying behavior.

Peter and Dalbert (2010) showed that the students’ individually experienced justice of their teachers’ behavior toward them personally represented an individual characteristic and not a class-level factor varying more strongly between individuals than between classes. This finding still needed to be replicated. Therefore, we expected that the experience of teacher justice would vary more strongly at the individual than at the class level. The negative relation between teacher justice and bullying behavior should thus be significant at the individual and not at the class level.

5 | BELIEF IN A JUST WORLD

The extent to which students experience their teachers’ behavior as just depends on how strongly they endorse BJW. According to just-world hypothesis (e.g., Lerner, 1980), people need to believe in a just world in which everyone gets what they deserve and deserves what they get. This belief enables them to deal with their social environment as though it were stable and orderly and thus serves important adaptive functions. Just-world researchers have identified three functions of BJW (Dalbert, 2001; for a review, see also Dalbert & Donat, 2015).

First, the assimilation function helps individuals confronted with injustice to preserve BJW by restoring justice psychologically (e.g., minimizing the injustice). Consequently, strong just-world believers felt more justly treated by others than weak just-world believers (for a review, see Dalbert & Donat, 2015). In the school context, students with a stronger BJW can thus be expected to feel more justly treated by their teachers than those with a weaker BJW (e.g., Dalbert & Stoeber, 2005).

Second, the trust function enables people to have trust in others and in the justice of their fate. This trust has adaptive consequences. It gives individuals the confidence to invest in long-term goals, to trust others to treat them justly, and to be justly rewarded. In the school context, students with a stronger BJW can thus be expected to show more trust in their teachers to treat them justly, grade them justly, and set just achievement requirements (for a review, see Dalbert & Donat, 2015). Because of the assimilation and trust function, we expected students’ BJW to be positively related to their experience of teacher justice.

Third, the motive function compels individuals to behave justly in order to maintain a just world. In this function, BJW is indicative of a personal contract (Lerner, 1980), the terms of which obligate the individual to behave justly, and can be seen as an indicator of an implicit justice motive (Dalbert, 2001). For example, strong just-world believers strove for justice themselves and were motivated to achieve personal goals by just means (for a review, see Dalbert & Donat, 2015). By acting justly, they respect the terms of their personal contract (Lerner, 1977), which gives them the prospect of being justly rewarded. Additionally, BJW has been found to be connected with less rule-breaking behavior, fewer delinquent intentions, and less academic dishonesty and delinquent behavior in adolescents (for a review, see Dalbert & Donat, 2015; Donat, Dalbert, & Kamble, 2014). From the perspective of this motive function, unjust behavior represents a threat to BJW and to the personal contract. Thus, students with a strong BJW have been shown to be more likely than those with a weak BJW to intuitively avoid bullying behavior (Correia & Dalbert, 2008; Donat et al., 2012). We, therefore, expected that students’ BJW and their bullying behavior would be negatively correlated. Considering the assimilation and trust function of BJW, we expected that this relation would be at least partly mediated by teacher justice as it would allow strong just-world believers to assimilate their experiences of injustice and, therefore, to feel more justly treated by others.

6 | CURRENT STUDY

One aim of our studies was to replicate previous findings on the negative relation between students’ personal BJW and their bullying behavior. Additionally, we investigated the relations of students’ experiences of teacher justice and classroom management simultaneously. Further, we examined the extent to which these experiences would predict bullying behavior at the individual and class level. Consequently, we tested the following hypotheses: The stronger students’ personal BJW was (1) the more likely they would be to evaluate their teachers’ behavior toward them personally as being just and (2) the less likely they would be to bully others. (3) The relation between personal BJW and bullying behavior was at least partly mediated by teacher justice. Due to the processes promoted by the subjective experiences of teacher justice (i.e., rule observance and feelings of belonging to school), we expected that teacher justice would be more likely to predict bullying behavior at the individual level than at the class level. (4) The more positive the students’ evaluation of
their teachers’ classroom management was, the less likely the students would be to bully others. Specifically, we aimed to investigate whether classroom management explained additional variance in bullying behavior above and beyond personal BJW and teacher justice, and we expected classroom management to be more likely to predict bullying behavior at the class level than at the individual level. Moreover, we expected that these relations would persist when we controlled for confounding effects of student sex and school type.

7 | STUDY 1

7.1 | Method

7.1.1 | Sample and procedure

The participants in this study were 1,273 (46.7% girls and 51.1% boys) German school students aged between 13 and 17 years (M = 14.2; SD = 0.5). Fifty-seven students did not indicate their age and 29 students did not indicate their sex. The students were enrolled at 29 schools; all of them were in grade 8. We investigated eight-graders as studies showed highest bullying prevalence rates among students aged between 13 and 15 years (e.g., Rigby, 1997; Scheithauer, Hayer, Petermann, & Jugert, 2006). Sixteen of the schools were intermediate track (German: “Sekundarschule”; n = 544; girls = 232); most students graduating from these schools are eligible to do an apprenticeship or vocational training and go on to work in white-collar jobs later on. Ten were academic track (German: “Gymnasium”; n = 576; girls = 287); students graduating from these schools with an “Abitur” qualification are eligible to attend university. Two were integrated track (German: “integrierte Gesamtschule”; n = 153; girls = 75), in which students from intermediate and academic track are together in one school. In sum, 71 classes participated, 6–28 students per class (M = 17.8, SD = 5.2). In the vast majority of the classes (n = 62; 87.3%), more than ten students participated. Included in our analyses were students who were present on the day of data collection. No information about the number of students who usually belong to each class was available. Participants were invited to complete a questionnaire assessing justice and experiences in school. It was stressed that participation was anonymous and voluntary. The assessment was conducted in the classroom during lesson time. The study was approved by the responsible authority and the school management, and written consent was obtained from the participants and their parents.

7.1.2 | Measures

Personal BJW was measured using the Personal Belief in a Just World Scale (Dalbert, 1999), which comprises seven items designed to capture the belief that, overall, events in a person’s life are just (α = .81; r̂ij est = .382; α ranged in other studies between α = .68 and α = .88, Correia, Kamble, & Dalbert, 2009; Dalbert & Stoeber, 2006; e.g., “I am usually treated justly”; “Overall, events in my life are just”). We assessed teacher justice using the 10-item Teacher Justice Scale (Dalbert & Stöber, 2002), which was designed to capture students’ experience of the justice of their teachers’ behavior toward them personally (α = .84; r̂ij est = .34; α ranged in other studies between α = .87 and α = .88, Dalbert & Stoeber, 2006; Peter & Dalbert, 2010; e.g., “My teachers generally treat me justly”).

We measured classroom management using four scales to capture students’ experiences of their teachers’ day-to-day behavior toward them (Roland & Galloway, 2002): Caring (four items; e.g., “I feel that my teachers care about me”); Teaching (four items; e.g., “The teachers are good at instructing the whole class”); Monitoring (four items; e.g., “Our teachers make sure that we do our homework properly”); Intervention (three items; e.g., “When students disrupt, teachers deal with it well”). Roland and Galloway (2002) reported separate Cronbach’s alpha values for the scales ranging from α = .63 to α = .80, but also formed a second-level score “classroom management” with α = .88 consisting of all items. However, the authors did not report an analysis regarding the items’ dimensionality. Therefore, we ran a principal component analysis that showed two dimensions: all items of Teaching, Monitoring, and Intervention were explained by one factor; three items of Caring were explained by a second factor; another Caring item could not be clearly assigned to one of these scales and was skipped. Consequently, we used one aggregated scale, “Classroom Management” with 11 items (α = .87; r̂ij est = .38), and another scale, “Caring” with three items (α = .61; r̂ij est = .34), to measure different aspects of classroom management. Responses on all above-mentioned scales were made on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 6 (totally agree).

We assessed self-reported bullying behavior using four items from Rigby and Slee’s (1993) 20-item Peer Relations Questionnaire (α = .70; r̂ij est = .37; α ranged in other studies between α = .55 and α = .78, Correia et al., 2009; Rigby & Slee, 1993; e.g., “How often in the last four weeks did you like to make other adolescents scared?”). We added the timeframe “in the last four weeks” to the original instrument. Responses on this scale were made on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (very often). We formed scale scores by averaging the responses across items, reverse coding negative items as necessary.

7.1.3 | Multilevel modeling and analytic procedure

We conducted multilevel analysis to test predicted effects at the individual and at the class level (Snijders & Bosker, 2012). Besides the potential to investigate such effects, multilevel modeling (MLM) additionally provides results with accurate estimates of standard errors, taking into account the usually increased similarities of students within one class or school. We conducted two-level random intercept models with classes at level 2 and individual students at level 1 by applying the software package Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012). We used aggregated student data to assess teacher justice and classroom management at the class level. As customary, we applied a grand mean centering for all metric constructs at the individual level (for a discussion of centering, see Bickel, 2007). In MLM, missing data can lead to distortions of the parametric estimation, and models should, therefore, be calculated with complete datasets. Heck,
Thomas, and Tabata (2010) suggest that “users ideally should have close to complete data (e.g., 5% or less missing)” (p. 8). The portion of missing data regarding the variables in Study 1 was very low (between 0.01% for bullying behavior and 0.02% for teacher justice). Further, we applied the approved full information maximum likelihood (FIML) method in Mplus to deal with missing data by using all available information.

### 7.2 Results

According to our first hypothesis, personal BJW was significantly correlated with teacher justice (see Table 1). The more strongly the students endorsed personal BJW, the more they experienced their teachers’ behavior toward them personally as just. According to our second hypothesis, personal BJW was negatively correlated with bullying behavior: The more the students endorsed personal BJW, the less bullying behavior they reported. Furthermore, teacher justice, classroom management, and caring were negatively correlated with bullying behavior: The more the students felt treated justly by their teachers and the more positively the students evaluated their teachers’ classroom management and caring, the less bullying behavior they reported. Additionally, girls felt more justly treated by their teachers than boys, evaluated their teachers’ classroom management more positively, and reported less bullying behavior.

We calculated several models in which predictor variables were added stepwise, making it possible to test main and mediating effects. We also considered sex as a moderator and thus added the interaction terms Sex × Personal BJW and Sex × Teacher Justice to the models at the student level. Further, we included two effect code variables to model the three school types the students attended to control for the students’ educational background at the class level. Table 2 shows all regression models in an overview. Model 1 indicated, in line with the literature, that girls were less likely to report bullying than boys. In Models 2–6, we tested the expected relation of personal BJW with bullying behavior and the mediation effect of teacher justice. In line with our expectations, personal BJW negatively predicted bullying behavior. This effect was fully mediated by teacher justice, with the effect of personal BJW being insignificant after the inclusion of teacher justice in Model 4. Moreover, the effect of teacher justice was significant at the individual level only. None of the interaction effects were significant, nor were the effects of school type. As stated in hypothesis 4, we further expected the students’ evaluation of their teachers’ classroom management to be negatively related to their bullying behavior. Here, we expected this relation more likely to be significant at the class level than at the individual level. The results partly supported our hypothesis (see Model 8). The effect of the teachers’ classroom management as individually experienced by the students was significant, but the effect of the teachers’ caring was not. Additionally, the effect was significant at the individual level but not at the class level.

### 7.3 Discussion

The results of Study 1 provided support for many of our hypotheses. Specifically, the more the students endorsed personal BJW, the more likely they were to evaluate their teachers’ behavior toward them personally as just and the more the students endorsed personal BJW, the less likely they were to bully others. Moreover, as expected, our multilevel analyses showed that this relation was fully mediated by the experience of teacher justice, and that the effect of teacher justice on bullying behavior was significant at the individual level but not at the class level. This latter result is consistent with recent studies (e.g., Peter & Dalbert, 2010) emphasizing that teacher justice more likely represents an individual characteristic than a class-level factor. Moreover, the individually experienced teacher justice, but not the more “objective” class-level teacher justice, seemed to be particularly important for student bullying behavior.

The hypothesis that classroom management would be related to bullying behavior in addition to personal BJW and teacher justice was partly supported by our data. The more positive the individual students’ experiences of their teachers’ classroom management (but not caring) were, the less likely the students were to bully others. However, students’ individual experience of their teachers’ classroom management seemed to be more important than the class-mean experience. As the intra-class correlations indicated, classroom management experiences varied more between different students than between different classes. The same was observed for teacher justice. This may indicate that it is in fact teachers’ classroom management behavior that varies more with different teacher–student

### TABLE 1 Correlations, intra-class-correlations, and descriptive statistics of study variables (study 1; N = 1273)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Personal BJW</th>
<th>Teacher justice</th>
<th>Classroom management</th>
<th>Caring</th>
<th>ICC</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal BJW</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher justice</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>.49*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom management</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>.51*</td>
<td>.56*</td>
<td></td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.41*</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>-.19*</td>
<td>-.33*</td>
<td>-.27*</td>
<td>-.08*</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For sex, 0 = male and 1 = female; all other variables ranged between 1 and 6, with higher values indicating stronger endorsement of the constructs; BJW = belief in a just world; ICC = intra-class correlation; α = Cronbach’s alpha.

*P_{two-tailed} < .05.
interactions than with different teacher–class interactions. Another explanation might be that there were perceptual factors that were more inherent within the students than within the situation in the class. A combination of the two factors also seems possible.

8 | STUDY 2

In our second study, we focused on replicating the findings of Study 1 in a different school year and with different students from the eighth grade. The replication offered the opportunity to generalize the meaning of students’ personal BJW and experiences of their teachers’ behavior toward them personally for their bullying behavior.

8.1 | Method

8.1.1 | Sample and procedure

The participants in this study were 1,658 (50.8% girls and 48.7% boys) German school students aged between 12 and 17 years (M = 14.1; SD = 0.5). Seven students did not indicate their age and eight students did not indicate their sex. The students were enrolled at 38 schools; all of them were in grade 8. Sixteen of the schools were intermediate track (German: “Sekundarschule”; n = 618; girls = 298); fifteen were academic track (German: “Gymnasium”; n = 715; girls = 377); seven were integrated track (German: “integrierte Gesamtschule”; n = 325; girls = 167). In sum, 86 classes participated, with 6–28 students per class (M = 19.2, SD = 4.9). In the vast majority of the classes (n = 82; 95.3%), more than ten students participated. Included in our analyses were students who were present on the day of data collection. No information about the number of students who usually belong to each class was available. Participants were invited to complete a questionnaire assessing justice and experiences in school. It was stressed that participation was anonymous and voluntary. The assessment was conducted in the classroom during lesson time 1 year later. The study was approved by the responsible authority and the school management, and written consent was obtained from the participants and their parents.

8.1.2 | Measures

In Study 2, we used the same scales as in Study 1 to measure personal BJW (α = .80; r_{ij est} = .36), teacher justice (α = .85; r_{ij est} = .36), and bullying behavior (α = .68; r_{ij est} = .35). Classroom management was analyzed in the same way as in Study 1. Again, 11 items of Teaching, Monitoring,
and Intervention formed the one-dimensional scale “Classroom Management” (α = .86; r̄ij est = .36), and three items of Caring formed a second scale (α = .56; r̄ij est = .30). Responses on these scales were made on the same six-point scales as in Study 1. We formed scale scores by averaging the responses across items, reverse coding negative items.

8.2 Results

The portion of missing data regarding the variables in Study 2 was very low (between 0.001% for bullying behavior and 0.02% for personal BJW). Personal BJW was significantly correlated with teacher justice (see Table 3). The more strongly the students endorsed personal BJW, the more justly they felt treated by their teachers. Furthermore, personal BJW was negatively correlated with bullying behavior. The more strongly the students endorsed personal BJW, the less bullying behavior they reported. Teacher justice, classroom management, and caring were negatively correlated with bullying behavior. Additionally, girls endorsed personal BJW more strongly than boys, felt more justly treated by their teachers, evaluated their teachers’ classroom management as more positive, and reported less bullying behavior.

To test our hypotheses, we calculated the same models as in Study 1, adding predictor variables stepwise. The results (see Table 4) were quite similar to those in Study 1. Differences were that teacher justice mediated the effect of personal BJW only partly. This effect was smaller but remained significant after the inclusion of teacher justice in Model 4, which indicated a mediation effect. Further, classroom management showed a significant effect at the class level in Model 7 in addition to personal BJW and teacher justice before the inclusion of the individual variables of classroom management and caring. Another difference was that the intermediate school type was significant at the class level.

8.3 Discussion

Most conclusions can be drawn on the basis of Study 1 as the results were very similar in the two studies. The more the students endorsed personal BJW, the more they felt treated justly by their teachers and the less likely they were to bully others. A difference in the current study was that teacher justice and personal BJW both showed incremental effects for bullying behavior that were independent of each other. Accordingly, both constructs seemed to have genuine associations with bullying behavior. Another difference in Study 2 was that classroom management was important for bullying behavior at the class level but not at the individual level. This means that there seemed to be a tendency toward a common perception on the part of the students regarding the classroom management of their teachers. Yet, it was not possible to clearly show that this common perception affected self-reports on bullying incrementally with regard to individual perceptions of the students. Furthermore, we observed a significant school-type effect. Thus, some school types—especially intermediate track—might be more prone to bullying than others. Still, our data did not make it possible to distinguish whether this was due to selection or socialization.

9 GENERAL DISCUSSION

In these two studies, we aimed to replicate previous findings on the relation between students’ personal BJW and their bullying behavior, to investigate the meaning of students’ experiences of teacher justice and classroom management for bullying, and to examine whether these experiences would explain bullying behavior at the individual and class level.

Our results are in line with the reasoning that the motive function of BJW (Dalbert, 2001; Lerner, 1980) provides a key to understanding why people avoid deviant and rule-breaking behavior in general and bullying behavior in particular. We expected that BJW would be an indicator of an implicit justice motive that can help to explain bullying behavior. Thus, we observed that the more students endorsed personal BJW, the less likely they were to self-report bullying behavior. These findings were consistent in both studies and substantiate observations from previous studies (Correia & Dalbert, 2008; Donat et al., 2012). Further, our findings support our assumption that personal BJW is negatively connected with students’ self-reported unjust behavior that breaches the terms of the personal contract (Lerner, 1980). Bullying clearly violates the personal contract to observe the rules of justice. Students with a strong personal BJW therefore seem to intuitively avoid these kinds of behavior. Likewise, other studies have shown a strong BJW to be correlated with less rule-breaking behavior, fewer delinquent intentions, and less cheating and delinquent behavior (for a review, Dalbert & Donat, 2015; Donat et al.,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3</th>
<th>Correlations, intra-class-correlations, and descriptive statistics of study variables (study 2; N = 1658)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal BJW</td>
<td>.06*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher justice</td>
<td>.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom management</td>
<td>.07*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For sex, 0 = male and 1 = female; all other variables ranged between 1 and 6, with higher values indicating stronger endorsement of the constructs; BJW = belief in a just world; ICC = intra-class-correlation; α = Cronbach’s alpha.

*p two-tailed < .05.
2014). Taken collectively, we interpret these results as evidence for an individual intuitive process among students that explains bullying behavior. The need to believe in a just world (the justice motive) is associated at an intuitive level with the obligation to maintain a just world—for example by behaving justly and by avoiding bullying behavior.

We also included teacher justice as a possible mediator of BJW’s effect on bullying behavior. In line with the assimilation and trust function of BJW, we showed that the more strongly the students endorsed BJW, the more justly they felt treated by their teachers. Further, teacher justice at least partly mediated the association between BJW and bullying behavior. The more students felt justly treated by their teachers, the less likely they were to self-report bullying behavior. These results were consistent across both studies and in line with previous findings (Donat et al., 2012). However, the result that teacher justice predicted bullying behavior independent of personal BJW in one study might also be indicative of important processes besides BJW’s assimilation and trust functions. The effect of teacher justice was observed at the individual but not at the class level which supports Peter and Dalbert’s (2010) conclusion that teacher justice, understood as students’ individually experienced justice of their teachers’ behavior toward them personally, more likely represents a subjective notion than a class-level factor.

In an extension of recent studies, we considered the students’ experiences of their teachers’ classroom management (Roland & Galloway, 2002) and investigated whether classroom management explained additional variance in bullying behavior in addition to personal BJW and teacher justice. We expected that classroom management would be negatively related to bullying behavior more at the class level than at the individual level. Our results partly supported these expectations. In both studies, classroom management but not caring was negatively connected with bullying behavior above and beyond personal BJW and teacher justice. The more positive the students’ experiences of their teachers’ classroom management were, the less likely they were to self-report bullying behavior. However, the results were mixed with regard to different levels. Classroom management explained bullying behavior at the individual level in Study 1 and at the class level in Study 2. It seems unlikely that this difference is explainable by specific properties of the samples. Yet, it would be necessary to include samples with a larger number of classes to detect effects regarding the class level with high probability, especially as there were fewer classes in Study 1 than in Study 2. Another explanation might be that effects covaried with specific cultural and pedagogical features of schools and classes or specific teachers. In sum, the students’ experienced classroom management and caring—as measured with Roland and Galloway’s (2002)

### Table 4: Multilevel regression models for predictors of self-reported bullying behavior (study 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
<th>Model 6</th>
<th>Model 7</th>
<th>Model 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fixed effects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>.23** (.05)</td>
<td>.20** (.04)</td>
<td>.20** (.04)</td>
<td>.19** (.04)</td>
<td>.19** (.04)</td>
<td>.19** (.04)</td>
<td>.18** (.04)</td>
<td>.17** (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 (student)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>-.46** (.05)</td>
<td>-.42** (.05)</td>
<td>-.42** (.05)</td>
<td>-.39** (.04)</td>
<td>-.39** (.04)</td>
<td>-.39** (.05)</td>
<td>-.39** (.05)</td>
<td>-.38** (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal BJW</td>
<td>-.29** (.03)</td>
<td>-.30** (.04)</td>
<td>-.10* (.04)</td>
<td>-.10* (.04)</td>
<td>-.06 (.05)</td>
<td>-.06 (.05)</td>
<td>-.05 (.06)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex × Personal BJW</td>
<td>.03 (.05)</td>
<td>.00 (.05)</td>
<td>.00 (.05)</td>
<td>-.07 (.07)</td>
<td>-.07 (.07)</td>
<td>-.07 (.07)</td>
<td>-.07 (.07)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher justice</td>
<td>-.29** (.04)</td>
<td>-.29** (.04)</td>
<td>-.34** (.06)</td>
<td>-.34** (.06)</td>
<td>-.33** (.07)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex × Teacher Justice</td>
<td>.10 (.06)</td>
<td>.10 (.06)</td>
<td>.10 (.07)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.06 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2 (class)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School type integrated</td>
<td>-.05 (.05)</td>
<td>-.06 (.04)</td>
<td>-.06 (.04)</td>
<td>-.04 (.04)</td>
<td>-.04 (.04)</td>
<td>-.04 (.04)</td>
<td>-.06 (.04)</td>
<td>-.07 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School type intermediate</td>
<td>.17** (.05)</td>
<td>.12** (.04)</td>
<td>.12** (.04)</td>
<td>.12** (.04)</td>
<td>.11** (.04)</td>
<td>.11** (.04)</td>
<td>.12** (.04)</td>
<td>.13** (.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class teacher justice</td>
<td>-.06 (.09)</td>
<td>-.06 (.09)</td>
<td>.08 (.12)</td>
<td>.08 (.12)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class classroom</td>
<td>-.24** (.09)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.18 (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class caring</td>
<td>.17 (.09)</td>
<td>.11 (.09)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-Square Level 1/Level 2</td>
<td>.06/.34</td>
<td>.14/.32</td>
<td>.14/.32</td>
<td>.20/.28</td>
<td>.20/.30</td>
<td>.20/.29</td>
<td>.20/.44</td>
<td>.20/.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unstandardized regression coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses. For sex, 0 = male and 1 = female. School type variables are effect codes with reference Gymnasium (academic track). All other measures are z-standardized. BJW = Belief in a just world.

*p<.01, **p<.001. ICCbullying = .053.
instrument—seem to be less important for students’ bullying behavior than their experiences of teacher justice. However, we could not figure out the extent to which students’ experiences of classroom management represent either an individual or a class-level factor for the explanation of their bullying behavior. Thus, in future studies, the circumstances under which classroom management is important at both levels should be investigated. In general, cultural and educational features are important for justice concerns and bullying. However, the empirical background of our hypotheses was based on studies with students from different cultures as for example German, Portuguese, and Indian (Correia & Dalbert, 2008; Donat et al., 2012). This indicated that we were depicting very general human processes.

Yet, our results suggest that future research examining the role of teachers’ day-to-day behavior in explaining student bullying behavior should focus more closely on experiences of the justice of teachers’ behavior than on experiences of teachers’ classroom management and caring. The students’ experience of being treated in a just and respectful manner by teachers contributes to their sense of being a valued member of the class and thus promotes their feeling of social inclusion (Bude & Lantermann, 2006; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Umlauff et al., 2013). The sense of belonging to a group reinforces the students’ personal obligation to behave in accordance with the group’s rules and is thus an important condition for their rule-abiding behavior (Emler & Reicher, 2005). Consequently, students’ experience of teacher justice plays a central role in explaining such behavior. School is often the first social institution to which children are exposed. It is here that they learn about the legitimacy of authority. The more justly they feel treated at school, the more they will see the school authorities as legitimate. It seems likely that they will also generalize these experiences to other social domains (Gouveia-Pereira et al., 2003; Sanches et al., 2012). In consequence, students’ experience of teacher justice seems to be important in explaining not only school-specific forms of deviant and aggressive behavior (e.g., bullying) but also such behavior outside school.

Overall, students’ experience of teacher justice—in contrast to their experience of teachers’ classroom management—seems to play a key role in explaining bullying behavior, and this can be of great practical relevance. This can be due to two processes. The more teachers’ behavior is seen as just, (1) the more school rules should be seen as legitimate and fair, and (2) the more students’ feelings of social inclusion should be strengthened. Both consequences of justice experiences—rule acceptance and feelings of belonging to the school in particular and society in general—can be fostered by teachers who are seen as behaving justly. Thus, just behavior in teachers has the potential to prevent bullying on a day-to-day basis and even to improve bullying intervention programs.

10 | LIMITATIONS

Some important limitations to our research should be noted. Our data are cross-sectional and thus, no causal conclusions can be drawn. Researchers should combine a longitudinal design with a multilevel approach in future studies on student bullying behavior. Further, our variables were assessed by self-report measures, possibly leading to an overestimation of common variance and potentially to measurement errors due to social desirability bias. To improve validity, it might be interesting to combine teachers’ perception of their students’ bullying behavior with the students’ self-reports. Moreover, we observed relatively weak reliability regarding the Caring subscale (both studies) and the Bullying scale (Study 2). This might be due to the scales’ length of three and four items each. Cronbach’s alpha is dependent on the number of a scale’s items, making it difficult to compare alphas across different scales. The additionally provided index \( r_{\text{est}} \) is independent of test length, and following Cronbach (1951), a test with 16 items with \( \alpha = .80 \) has a \( r_{\text{est}} = .20 \). Neither of the scales’ indices fell below this value. Further, there was a small proportion of classes in which only six to ten students participated. These students might have been overrepresented in the corresponding class mean. As we had no information about the class sizes we could not control for this. In future studies, this information should be collected and unrepresentative classes could be excluded from multilevel analyses. Moreover, we measured classroom management using items developed by Roland and Galloway (2002) who formed an aggregated measure consisting of the four subscales Caring, Teaching, Monitoring, and Intervention to explain bullying behavior. In contrast, we used two different aspects of classroom management which means that our results are comparable with Roland and Galloway’s (2002) results only to a limited extent and should be interpreted with caution.

We controlled for only some confounding factors, namely student sex and school type. In future studies, researchers should control for further characteristics that may also be related to bullying behavior, such as personality (e.g., Tani, Greenman, Schneider, & Fregoso, 2003). Moreover, factors other than teacher justice, such as the justice of their family and peers, may be expected to play an important role in students’ lives and in their bullying behavior (Kamble & Dalbert, 2012). Thus, parent and classmate justice might be additional mediators in the relation between the students’ BJW and their bullying behavior. Further, in our study we did not differentiate between forms of bullying (e.g., direct vs. indirect), as solely on the basis of just-world theory we could not assume that the relations between bullying, teacher justice, and BJW would vary depending on different bullying forms. Still, in future studies it could be investigated whether these forms are important in these relations.

11 | CONCLUSION

Our studies indicated that teachers’ just behavior was more important to the individual student’s bullying behavior than their classroom management behavior. Thus, schools should make particular efforts to provide a just environment. In terms of classroom practice, teachers should strive to behave justly toward their students on a day-to-day basis to sustain their rule-abiding behavior. In doing so, teachers should take into account their students’ interpretations of justice, as justice cognitions are at least partly subjective (e.g., Dalbert, Schneiderwind, &
Saalbach, 2007; Thorkildsen, Nolen, & Fournier, 1994). Teachers can learn more about their students’ justice cognitions when (a) they are provided with educational psychology justice research in teacher training, (b) they are motivated to apply this knowledge in their lessons and to create an open discussion climate which enables students to express their opinions and feelings, and (c) they contrast and complement their own perspective with the perspective of their students. Furthermore, just behavior in teachers depends on aspects of interactional justice (for a review, see Peter, Donat, Umlauft, & Dalbert, 2013), meaning that teachers should treat their students with dignity, civility, and respect. Still, there is a clear need for a closer investigation of the specific teachers’ behavior studies evaluate as being more or less just.

ENDNOTES

1 In accordance with just-world theory and research, we use “just” instead of “fair” as an attribute of the world, teachers’ behavior, students’ experiences at school, etc., knowing that “fair” is used more often in North America than “just.”

2 Cronbach (1951) showed that alpha is dependent on the numbers of items, and introduced $r_{xx}$ as an index of homogeneity which is independent of test length, for example, as a “rule of thumb,” a test with 16 items with $a = .80$ has a $r_{xx} = .20$.

REFERENCES


Dalbert, C., & Stöber, J. (2002). Gerechtes Schulklima [Just school climate]. In J. Stöber (Ed.), Skalendokumentation zum Projekt “Persönliche Ziele von SchülerInnen in Sachsen-Anhalt” (Hallesche Berichte zur Pädagogischen Psychologie Nr. 3 (pp. 34–35). Halle (Saale), Germany: Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg, Department of Educational Psychology.


How to cite this article: Donat M, Knigge M, Dalbert C. Being a good or a just teacher: Which experiences of teachers’ behavior can be more predictive of school bullying? Aggressive Behavior. 2018;44:29–39. https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21721