Snake Oil:
Desert and Deservingness in Making American Social Policy

Jeffrey B. Wenger
Associate Professor of Public Policy Analysis
The University of Georgia
School of Public and International Affairs
Department of Public Administration and Policy
202A Baldwin Hall
Athens GA 30602
jwenger@uga.edu

Vicky M. Wilkins
Associate Professor of Public Administration
The University of Georgia
School of Public and International Affairs
Department of Public Administration and Policy
206 Baldwin Hall
Athens GA 30602

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Distinctions of Desert: Making American Social Policy
Abstract
A common theme in public administration is that racial attitudes influence the provision of social benefits. Less well understood is the relationship between notions of deservingness and racial attitudes. We develop a theory linking philosophical with social psychological conceptions of desert. In particular we focus on the “belief in a just world” concept - BJW (Furnham 2003; Lerner 1980) to link notions of desert, racial attitudes and social provision. We extend our theory to multiple groups and explain how public conceptions of desert mediate our evaluation of African-Americans and other group’s “worthiness” to receive social benefits. Secondly, we argue that because these notions of desert are largely socially constructed they are less useful as valid expressions of the goals that policy should fulfill. This is important because notions of deservingness have a long history in the discussion of social policy in the United States. However, until now, a systematic theory of how deservingness relates to the willingness of society to provide social benefits has been lacking.

Keywords: Desert, Deservingness, Belief in a Just World, Racism, Sexism, Social Policy
Introduction

Historically, the primary role of government has been to provide protection to its citizens. In the earliest times these protections were simply that, safeguarding people from physical assault and defending property. Over time, the scope of these protections expanded; the role of government began to include the protection from risk. Early government actions worked to provide protections to firms, indemnifying the individual owners from the liability of the goods and services they produced and sold. Thus was born the limited liability of the corporation (Moss 2004). Early in the 20th century government extended these protections to individuals by providing workplace protections for children and then for adults.

Ultimately, the government's sphere extended to sheltering people from the economic risks of a complex capitalist economy. Soon the US, like much of Europe, started protecting workers and citizens from economic ills such as poverty and unemployment. Essentially, the government was able to act as an insurer of last resort, providing aid to those who were harmed by the vicissitudes of the economy. Developing this type of insurance required technological mechanisms that enabled the calculation of risk and expected losses that would occur in the event of misfortune. The insurance role of the government also required an advanced bureaucracy that could implement the plans, adjudicate eligibility, and administer aid.

A considerable part of the bureaucratic function in administering these insurance plans was to limit the “moral hazard” that occurs when the cost of engaging in risky behavior is reduced. On many occasions, the resulting change in behavior that occurs when individual risk is reduced is desirable. Entrepreneurs are more likely to engage in enterprises if their liability is limited (Moss, 2004). In other cases, promoting risk taking is undesirable. When the consequences of risk taking are not fully paid for by the person taking the risk, we have a case of “moral hazard.” Moral hazard is present in all forms of insurance, because when the insurable event (bad outcome) is ameliorated by insurance, people become less mindful about bad events occurring. Indeed, at the extreme a person might be indifferent between the status quo and the calamity – provided there was enough insurance coverage to compensate them for the loss.

Moral hazard is commonplace and gives rise to two sets of problems. First, the insured may be less diligent about preventing an insurable event from occurring (ex ante). Secondly, moral hazard may raise costs once an insurable event occurs (ex post). The structure and enforcement of insurance contracts helps limit both types of moral hazard. Unemployment insurance is a good example where specific design features of the program help mitigate ex ante moral hazard. Unemployment insurance coverage does not allow workers who voluntarily quit or who were fired for cause (e.g. theft,
insubordination, gross negligence) to receive unemployment insurance benefits. Ex post moral hazard is also limited; this is accomplished by limiting benefits to a maximum of 26 weeks (although in periods of high unemployment benefit durations may be extended - see Wenger (2006)). The unemployed must also actively search for work. In both cases these policies limit the benefits paid – first by capping them and in the second case by raising the likelihood of re-employment. In both cases it is primarily a bureaucratic function to implement these policies.

This type of policy implementation is at the heart of what a bureaucracy does. Implementation requires the bureaucrat to make a determination – usually based on rules, but occasionally based on their experience and discretion – as to who is eligible to receive benefits. We see eligibility determinations in nearly all government programs: Social Security, Disability, Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps (SNAP), temporary assistance to needy families (TANF), unemployment insurance, crop insurance, deposit insurance, Veterans benefits, and many others. In many cases these eligibility determinations are exceedingly simple. In the case of Medicare, becoming 65 years old is sufficient. For other programs earnings and assorted other factors may be influential in determining eligibility.

It would be misleading to argue the issue of moral hazard is the sole (or even primary!) rationale for determining eligibility. In many cases, there are good reasons to limit eligibility to prevent or limit moral hazard. However, just as often eligibility is based on some other set of criteria. Historically, race and racism have been important reasons to restrict access to social programs. As has been well documented in (Katznelson 2005) and elsewhere, the history of 20th century social policy is rife with issues of race.

Our goal is to cast the net wider than this narrow focus on moral hazard and the usual issues of race and sex. Instead of focusing solely on race, or gender, we argue that peoples’ perceptions of moral hazard influenced notions of desert and deservingness and played a critical role in shaping eligibility criteria for government programs. Neither is this unexplored terrain. Legislatively, the notion of the deserving poor extends back beyond the industrial revolution to Elizabethan England and the adoption of various poor laws. The idle poor were seen as undeserving – those who could work, but “chose” not to – were seen as morally deficient. English poor laws were designed to discipline this group by whipping, dismemberment, or execution.

We contend that notions of desert are central to making rules about who is covered by social policy and who is left uncovered. However, our argument differs substantially from previous research in the area: we argue that notions of desert are inadequate formulations to guide policy. In fact, desert bases (discussed in detail below) are developed in conjunction with a belief in a just world, and since effective justice of the world is a fundamental delusion (the world is not just in any meaningful sense),
our notions of desert cannot be a logical basis for public policymaking. This contention is very much at odds with our everyday notions of policy making, our history and our experience. However, as we will show it is often those who are most deserving, based on virtually any acceptable criteria, whom are provided with the least.

Equally important we discuss the extent that these rules are partly determined by the institutions themselves (Ingram & Schneider 1990c; Schneider & Ingram 1993d; Linder & Peters 1984; Ostrom & Gardner 1993) and are manifested in a fundamental social psychological phenomenon known as a Belief in a Just World. Citizen’s notions of desert coupled with beliefs in a just world give rise to patterns of social policymaking and systematic exclusion of groups from social provision and coverage. In the next section we discuss the role of desert and its conceptualization. We then draw on the philosophical literature to draw distinctions between need, entitlement and desert. Finally, we link our notions of desert to the institutional (racism, sexism, and legislative rules) mechanisms and extend then draw on how our belief in a just world informs our notions of desert.

**Patterns of Social Policymaking**

The United States is well known for having 50 state laboratories to experiment with public policy. Scholars often infer that the differences between states in policy adoption, implementation, and outcomes are indicative that there is not a “one best way.” When policies are implemented by the states or when states have the ability to shape the rules associated with policies (eligibility criteria, generosity…) we have to question what is being reflected in the variation of these rules. The median voter model suggests that the rules adopted by the state approximately reflect the ideological preferences of the state's median voter. However, what lies at the root of these preferences are strongly held beliefs about who is deserving of government assistance. Rare is the voter who becomes politically active over issues of economic efficiency (although there is always a waste, fraud, and abuse crowd).

When citizens observe differential outcomes by group they are faced with a dilemma: either the differences are deserved as a result of superior (or inferior) culture, genes, socialization etc. or the differences are undeserved and therefore unfair and unjust. In most cases citizen are predisposed to seeing the world as a just place (for reasons we discuss more fully below). Seeing the world as fundamentally just implies that the group differences are acceptable. After all, if the world is just, then the observed outcomes must be deserved. How can this be the case when life expectancy is linked to parental income? Children don't “deserve” the parents they are born to. Foster children are especially neglected in terms of state resources – yet they are seen as both in need and having strong claims of desert. Long periods of social injustice for racial minorities and women were observed while
maintaining a belief in a just world. Today we face similar issues with regard to eligibility based on sexual orientation. Spousal rights are only for those who are married, and marriage is defined by the state. Interestingly, we note that as perceptions of desert change over time, the rules governing eligibility for many social policies include welfare, especially for African-Americans and women, have changed fundamentally. Clearly, whatever theory we develop will have to incorporate mechanisms that account for these changes. As should also be clear, if our notions of desert change dramatically from generation to generation then they are probably not well-developed moral structures, and are unlikely to provide good guidance in policy analysis and decision-making.

**Theory of Desert and Deservingness**

Philosophers have grappled with the issue of desert long before policy scholars and political scientists. Indeed, Aristotle writes “Everyone agrees that in distributions the just share must be given on the basis of what one deserves” and further that “not everyone would name the same criterion of deserving.” While notions of desert have been around for millennia, very little policy analysis incorporates them. Perhaps one reason is that the criteria of deservingness have been both the lynchpins and the undoing of the theory. Much more recently, philosophers (Miller 1979; Kleinig 1971) have sought to make the concept more tractable and have argued that there are times when what a person deserves is conferred by a system of rules and institutions. Finally and importantly, other philosophers (Lamont 1994) have argued that the claims of desert are not a “purely internally defined concept.”

External goals and values must be imported in order to make concepts of desert determinate.

**Extant Literature**

As mentioned above, researchers in political science have long studied the factors that influence policy design. These factors include goals, tools, rules, and target populations (Ingram & Schneider 1990c; Linder & Peters 1984; Ostrom & Gardner 1993; Schneider & Ingram 1993d; Stone 1998). Schneider and Ingram (1990) argue that that social construction of target populations has a powerful influence on policy makers and shapes both the policy agenda and the design of policy (334). Ultimately, the policies adopted create the boundaries of target populations and signal, which citizens are deserving of government resources. In their work, policy serves to construct target populations that can be positively construed as “deserving” or negatively construed as undeserving. These constructions are reinforced by the language, metaphors, and stories we use to describe them and, ultimately solidified in the policy process, creating policy winners and losers. This framework posits that social constructions, like deservingness, are the product of some institutional action.

Several scholars have sought to understand the how social constructions are translated into policy design (Bensonsmith 2005; Nicholson-Crotty & Meier 2005; Schram 2005). For example,
Bensonsmith (2005) and Schram (2005) study the how the social constructions and stereotypes of African-Americans have influenced welfare policy. In her work, Bensonsmith (2005) argues that these constructions initially worked to exclude African-American women from welfare rolls and then, once they were included, fueled reforms to restrict the program. Similarly, Schram (2005) holds that the discourse surrounding the welfare program is increasingly “encoded with implicit racial connotations” (261). This is primarily the result of our culture priming people to see images in a certain, often racialized, way. He goes on to argue, that constructions not only reinforce negative views of persons of color receiving welfare benefits, but also increase the likelihood that persons of color will be forced to rely on public assistance.

Ingram and Schneider (1993) argue that notions of desert are fueled by institutional boundaries, rules, and structures. However, we contend that conceptions of desert are at least partly pre-institutional. This implies that notions of desert are formed before institutional interaction. Therefore, rather than treat these perceptions as exclusively endogenous factors that influence policy outcomes, desert should be treated as partly exogenous. To make this argument we draw from both philosophy literature and psychology to develop a theory of how an exogenous understanding of desert frames our beliefs about the formation, implementation and evaluation of poverty policies.

The Theory of Desert

In discussions of social justice, theories of desert have long been out of favor. The effort to construct an internally consistent political conception of justice advanced largely by Rawls' Theory of Justice (1971) has held sway over researchers' understanding of the correct criteria for policy analysis and evaluation. These typically include equal basic liberties, equality of opportunity and some redistributive mechanism. (Rawls preferred the “difference principle” - that observed inequalities in primary goods satisfy the criteria that inequalities in primary goods are acceptable only to the extent that the inequalities are to the advantage of the least well off.) Rawls' conception of social justice has always had its detractors (most famously - Nozick (1974)); in particular Nozick criticized Rawls insomuch as Rawls' conception of justice was ahistorical and patterned. Simply put, Nozick's criticism is that Rawls' theory of justice fails to take into account the circumstances that led to the observed outcomes. While much of the Nozickian enterprise has been thoroughly challenged, the notion that history should matter in social justice still resonates with many people – a folk philosophy, if you will.

Our goal in this section is not to defend notions of desert from a philosophical standpoint. Rather, it is to understand what notions of desert are, where they come from, and how they are used in political decision-making. We then seek to demonstrate that notions of desert are “psychologically necessary” – or in the words of Lerner notions of desert are a necessary delusion. This delusion allows
Desert Claims and Desert Bases

In their most basic form desert claims take the form of X deserves P by virtue of b. In keeping with the philosophical literature X is typically a person or entity, P is a punishment or prize, we shall call 'b,' the desert-basis (for similar formulations see (Feinberg 1970; Lamont 1994; Miller 1979; Sher 1989). A simple example of this type of statement is that Joe (X) deserves the largest slice of cake (P), by virtue of finishing all of his dinner (b). It is easy to see based on this formulation that desert is different from rights and needs. Joe does not have a right to the cake, nor does he necessarily need the cake. However, it is easy to conflate these ideas. Changing the desert-basis illustrates the ease with which the notions of desert and needs are conflated. For example, Joe may deserve the largest slice of cake because he had the smallest dinner portion. This gives the false appearance of needing the extra calories. Similarly, if we change desert-basis to something like Joe deserves the largest slice of cake because he finished his dinner first, this makes the statement sound like Joe has a right to the largest slice. These cases demonstrate the difficulty people have in keeping notions desert, rights and needs distinct.

Kleinig (1971) articulates another form that desert claims often take; he argues that institutional desert takes the form that X deserves P from Y, by virtue of b. Kleinig terms these types of desert claims as institutionalized desert claims and argues that the institution is often implicit. To maintain clarity we will make them explicit. Joe deserves the largest slice of cake, from the host, by virtue of finishing all his dinner. In both this and the previous formulation of desert there are three ways to undermine the desert claim. First and most directly, would be to demonstrate that the person did not, in fact, have the attributes necessary to merit desert. In the case above, we could point out that Joe did not finish his dinner (he forgot to drink his milk) and in fact, his sister Mary had finished her dinner first and deserved the cake. A second way of undermining the desert claim is to argue that the prize or punishment is inappropriate. In this case, Mary deserved to have a second helping, but not cake (cake is a different matter altogether). Similarly, one can argue that the institution is incorrect – the host is not responsible for providing cake. Finally, one can undermine the claim by disagreeing with the desert basis. Our experience is that this method for undermining the claim is the most common, and nearly insoluble. In the case above the person who finishes first does not deserve the largest slice of cake from the host, because finishing first does not carry with it any merit. For example, if Joe’s meal consisted of a small helping of mashed potatoes, then it seems unlikely that only eating a few bites of potatoes would be sufficient to constitute merit for a large slice of cake. Other considerations may also undermine this desert basis. If Joe, by eating so quickly, made a spectacle of himself then we might not
want to reward such behavior, and argue that eating too quickly is non-meritorious.

In sum, it seems clear that the agent (X) must possess some quality or attribute, or have performed some action b (the desert basis), if this occurs, then the agent deserves the prize or punishment. However, how the agent comes to possess the attribute of the desert basis is also important, and leads to many difficulties with the applicability of the desert and justice. For example, if the person comes to possess the attribute by no action on their part, this may diminish the force of the desert claim. It is one thing to say you deserved to win because you trained hard; it seems more difficult to claim to deserve to win if your primary opponent fell ill. A statement along the lines of “I deserved to win the race, because my main competition failed to show up.” simply doesn’t have much force. Consequently, the attribute that the agent must possess has more force when the agent has control over the action (we will not venture down the freewill path that naturally leads from the previous claim). It is sufficient for now to say that, the agent’s ownership of the attribute alters the force of the desert claim. We explore this more fully later in the paper.

As a final set of cases of how desert basis are attached to the agent, let’s consider cases of ill-fortune. To what extent can a person be deserving of some prize or punishment if they were the victim of circumstance? If you are in an auto accident do you deserve to be compensated by the other driver? If you are diagnosed with cancer, do you deserve treatment? These questions of desert are slightly more problematic (we would argue that in both cases the answer is yes), because of the reason that the desert basis is attached to the agent. It seems clear that auto accident victim may be entitled to some compensation similarly the cancer victim will certainly need treatment. However, in both cases desert claims are less robust – largely because the conditions that serve as the desert basis are only “accidentally” attached to the agent.

One final property of desert requires exploration. Desert is always a backward looking concept. Miller (1976:93) notes “desert judgments are justified on the basis of past and present facts about individuals never on the basis of states of affairs to be created in the future.” It may be appealing to argue that our desert claims are ultimately utility (welfare) enhancing. While it is undoubtedly true that awarding prizes or meting out punishments do act as incentives for people to achieve the attributes that serve as the basis of desert, it is not the case that these mechanisms were designed to achieve a maximum amount of welfare. Cases of excessive punishment such as mandatory sentencing and three-strikes laws seem to be justified by desert but are not easily justified on purely utilitarian grounds. Similarly, rewards such as tax incentives for green vehicle purchases or allowing their drivers to use high-occupancy lanes have been shown to be inefficient, despite arguments for desert in their favor.

*Desert and Appraising Attitudes*
By now it should be clear that when a person asserts, “Joe deserves to win the prize because of all his hard work.” A number of underlying statements are being made. As Favor (2010:105) indicates there are really three parts

1) the agent has or possesses the attribute deemed worthy of desert – Joe really did work hard
2) some *evaluative attitude* about the agent is required to assess the virtue of the desert basis – hard work has merit,
and,
3) the prize or punishment is a valid and effective expression of the evaluative attitude (in 2) – winning the prize is a reasonable reward for hard work.

While we have spent some time discussing the first component outlined above, we have argued elsewhere, that the validity of the desert basis is often the most contentious aspect of a desert claim. It is easy to argue that Joe’s hard work is an insufficient basis of desert. Others may argue, that Joe should not win because his output was inferior, or that he should not win because he had other advantages such as family wealth that he was not responsible for attaining. In all of these cases it seems clear that evaluative attitudes (Favor, 2010) or appraising attitudes (Miller, 1976) have a close relationship in the concept of desert.

It is here where Miller runs us into the shoals of philosophy and where the social sciences (particularly psychology) can provide some insight. Miller (1976) argues that the existence or occurrence of appraising attitudes depends on something uncertain, that is, it is not difficult to imagine a world where these attitudes do not exist. He also argues that we generally do not have a point or purpose in holding them. However, we argue that these appraising attitudes are not contingent, and they serve an important role in human psychology.

Importantly, Miller argues that there is a complex relationship between appraising attitudes and the concept of desert. First, without appraising attitudes it would be impossible to have a concept of desert – desert relies on appraisal or evaluation. Secondly, the range of desert bases hews closely to our appraising attitudes. To see this consider that we cannot deserve something based on what a person needs. Why not? Because we do not have appraising attitudes that are connected with needs. Physical, social, and psychological needs cannot be admired, and as a consequence cannot be appraised (we can assess the level at which they are satisfied but we cannot determine if the needs are good or bad). We can only admire/disdain a person because of what she is or does. This implies that if we can understand the origins of appraising attitudes and how they develop, we will be able to gain insight about the role of desert in public policy.

**Developing Appraising Attitudes: The role of the Belief in a Just World**
In the 1960s Melvin Lerner began a series of experiments to determine how people would react when faced with an innocent victim, who they could not help. The motivation for these studies was to investigate a troubling discovery Lerner had made while working at a mental hospital. Observing and participating in hospital staff interactions with mentally ill patients, Lerner came to observe disconcerting behavior by the hospital staff. Lerner describes sessions where the therapist would aggressively question patients about their efforts to find employment in the local community. Many patients were frightened at the prospect of leaving the hospital, and did not actively search for work and regularly missed interviews. However, they were aware that the staff wanted them to become employed. In the sessions, the therapist would push and prod the patients with questions about their search and interviews until, cornered, they admitted their lie – they had not searched or interviewed. The patients subjected to this treatment ended the sessions dejected and degraded as a result of the confrontation. At weekly staff meetings Lerner and his colleagues planned how to get rid of the “manipulators” who would not seek work. Lerner was plagued by this question and wondered how trained professionals would treat vulnerable patients with cruelty by using epithets such as “manipulator,” “burnt-out schiz,” and “old crock.” (Lerner, 1980: 2)

Lerner’s hypothesis was that this dysfunctional and cruel behavior was a defense mechanism that was “needed for anyone to be able to function for so long with so many people who were suffering, hurt, and would stay that way for a long time” (1980: 2) Lerner argued that people had a fundamental need to believe that the world was a just place, and that these mentally ill patients were a constant threat to that belief. It general, it is easy to see that some belief in a just world is necessary. In the absence of a just world, routine activities such as planning, savings, investing would be constantly called into question.

Lerner theorized that people would go out of their way to avoid threats to the just world beliefs. He argues that there are certain “rational strategies” for dealing with injustice. First, people will seek to prevent injustice from happening. In the event, that prevention is impossible or impractical then we seek restitution for the harm done and thereby restore some semblance of justice. Secondly, people deal with injustices by accepting the limits on what they can do. Since resources are limited and finite, people set priorities that “take into account the nature of the relationship to the victims, the effectiveness of one’s resources, and the potential risks or costs to be incurred in comparison with the probable benefits to others” (1980:19). Finally we have a set of “non-rational” responses to threats in our belief in a just world. First and most obviously we have denial and withdrawal. In this case people are selective about the information to which they expose themselves. In the event that you are faced with an injustice – sound the retreat and withdraw. With the passage of time and some distractions the
unjust event will leave your mind.

Perhaps the most interesting set of the non-rational responses are *reinterpreting the event*. They consist of reinterpreting the outcome, reinterpreting the cause, and reinterpreting the character of the victim. In a set of classic experiments (discussed briefly below) Lerner demonstrated that all three of these effects took place when people witness injustice happening to an innocent victim who they are unable to aid.

**Classic Experiments**

In a series of experiments Lerner demonstrated that the inability to help an innocent victim led to significant increases in victim derogation. In the most famous experiment, Lerner had students (the experimental subjects) come and observe a “learning experiment” - ostensibly to provide observational aid with the faculty member's research (they were told to look for changes in affect). Unbeknownst to the students the subject in the “learning experiment” was an actor. The actor entered the room and was informed that the negative treatment for the “learning experiment” was going to be conducted on that day. The negative treatment was an electric shock - painful but would not create lasting damage. The actor protests, indicating that she was unaware that this day the experiment was to include electric shocks. Ultimately she is “pressured” to submit to the experiment (recall that she is acting – although the students are unaware of this). Eventually the actor fails the learning experiment and is administered a shock. All of the interactions are observed by the students. The experiment randomly assigned one set of students the option of giving the actor an alternate treatment after she is shocked (reward treatment), the other set of students was not allowed to alter the actors treatment.

The results of the experiment are startling. Groups that were not able to alter the actors outcome were much more likely to hold negative attitudes about the actor. There was a statistically significant difference in students' willingness to derogate the victim, *if they were not afforded the option to alter the outcome of the treatment (shock)*. People were very angry about the experiment, however none of the people who watched the actor suffer, demonstrated their disapproval in any overt way. Not one of literally a thousand or so students in medicine, dentistry, nursing, psychology, arts and sciences - people with experience in the helping professions - complained. Not even a mild protest. The reasons given included that the participant did not act to end her own suffering. Denial of the event – the shocks were mild and she overreacted. Reshaping the event – she knew what she was signing up for. The facts are that the shocks are described as strong and painful, but will not cause any lasting damage. It is interesting to note that Miller (1977) indicates “*By helping a victim, the individual commits himself to a perception of the victim as someone deserving of help, and it is no longer easy for him to deny the need or the deservingness of the victim.*”
The experimental evidence validates the BJW phenomena and demonstrates the ubiquity of its effect and its strength. Threats to a person's belief in a just world are met with increases in victim derogation. This occurs in the complete absence of any evidence that could be used to justify the derogation.

**Measurements of the Degree of BJW**

Beyond validating BJW experimentally, researchers have developed instruments to that rely on self-reporting to assess the content of this belief system. The resulting questionnaires seek to measure the degree to which individuals perceive others as deserving of their fates in wide ranges of situations. Rubin & Peplau (1973, 1975) developed the earliest scales for this purpose. Their original scale (1973) was constructed to study the impact of draft lottery scores on 19-year-old male’s likability in the peer group. The scale consisted of 16 items (see appendix I) designed to measure the degree to which the respondents viewed the world as a “just” or “unjust” place. For example, respondents were asked on a 6-point response scale how much they agreed with the statement, “Basically, the world is a just place.” In 1975, Rubin and Peplau revised the scale; they include 13 items from the earlier scale and add 7 new items (see appendix I). These scales were reported to have reliability measures of $\alpha = .79$ and $\alpha = .80$, respectively. However, the validity and usefulness of these scales has been questioned (Ambrosio & Sheehan 1990, Furnham 1998a, 2003: Furnham & Procter 1989b; Maes 1998; Whatley 1993) and there are calls for the development of psychometrically improved measures. Nonetheless, the vast majority of BJW studies that use a questionnaire still rely on the Rubin and Peplau (1975) scale or some variant of it.

The calls for new and psychometrically improved measures of BJW have not gone unanswered. Researchers have developed more valid, improved, and subtle measures. There are now several scales used to measure BJW or features of it. (Dalbert, Montada, & Schmitt 1987b) developed a shorter 6-item scale, which has been validated in Spain and Great Britain (Furnham 1995). Numerous studies have found support for the use of the Dalbert scale to measure the BJW (Bierhoff, Klein, & Kramp 1991; Dalbert 1999; Dalbert, Fisch, & Montada 1992a; Dalbert & Yamauchi 1994) Taking a different approach, a research team in Great Britain created a longer, explicitly multidimensional questionnaire (Furnham & Proctor 1989). Their 30-item scale measures three possible worlds: just, unjust, or random. Lipkus et. al (1996) continued this effort offering a multidimensional scale that operationalized the distinction between BJW for the self a separate questionnaire focusing on BJW for others. Several findings confirmed the value and validity in differentiating between people who believe that their experiences are generally just or whether the world is generally just (Bègue & Bastounis 2003; Bègue & Muller 2006, Lipkus et al. 1996).
**Relationships between BJW and other social outcomes**

Using measures derived from scales like the ones discussed above, researchers are working to identify correlates associated with varying levels of BJW. High levels of BJW are positively correlated with measures of authoritarianism (Rubin & Peplau 1973), trust (Fink & Wilkins 1976), attendance at religious services (Rubin and Peplau 1973; Furnham & Gunter 1984; Lerner 1991), and a strong Protestant work ethic (Lerner 1974; Smith & Green 1984). Some studies have examined the relationship between demographic characteristics and BJW. Smith and Green (1984) and Calhoun and Cann (1994) found that BJW scores for whites were significantly higher than African-Americans' scores. Smith and Green (1984) also found that Republicans had higher scores than Democrats, who, in turn, had higher scores than Independents. This is further supported by the work of Dittmar and Dickinson (1993) and Wagstaff and Quirk (1983) who concluded that individuals with high BJW scores were more likely to support the status quo and were more likely to hold politically right-wing values. Smith and Green (1984) also found a slight positive correlation between income and BJW. However, in their study sex, occupational prestige, and educational attainment did not appear to be related (Smith & Green 1984). Other studies (O’Connor, Morrison, McLeod, & Anderson 1996; Stowers & Durm 1998) found no significant difference based on sex. However, the finding on the relationship between sex and BJW are mixed. Whatley (1993) and Furnham et al. (2009) found that males score higher on belief in a just world than females. Age is also positively correlated with BJW; studies find that older individuals report higher just world beliefs (Furnham & Proctor 1989; Furnham et al. 2009).

Just as certain characteristics are found to correlate with an individual’s BJW, researchers have also demonstrated that BJW scores are significantly correlated with certain beliefs and behaviors. One of the most studied relationships is between BJW and victim blaming. Using self-report scales, researchers have probed the association between BJW and victim blaming across numerous categories of victims: poor people in third world countries (Montada 1998) the disabled, AIDS patients (Connors & Heaven 1990, Furnham & Procter 1992) accident cases, rape victims (Kleinke & Meyer 1990), and cancer patients (Braman & Lambert 2001, Montada 1998). These studies offered support for the expectation that higher levels of BJW will lead to increased victim blaming. These findings are unsurprising since blaming the victim is one of the fundamental ways to mitigate threats to just world beliefs. In a study focused on how individuals preserve their belief in a just world, Reichle, Schneider, and Montada (1998) demonstrate how BJW and the responsibility to help the needy and willingness to act prosocially are related. They found that BJW beliefs motivate individuals to blame the needy for their affliction (finding that it is self-inflicted), minimize need levels, and justify their own advantage.
Additionally, they found that people with high levels of BJW were not disposed to assist the disadvantaged, which the authors believe is because efficient help is either effectively impossible or too costly (Reichle, Schneider, & Montada 1998). Similarly, Rubin and Peplau (1973) found that high levels of BJW were correlated with a tendency to prefer “winners” and to justify the victimization of African-Americans and women.

**Delusional Policymaking**

Thus far, we have traced both the philosophical and psychological research on desert/deservingness and have noted how they overlap. In this next section we discuss how notions of desert are commonplace in that they are used in everyday decisions about public policy analysis. We also discuss how these notions of desert are distorted by our psychological biases and lead to inaccurate assessments of the world. Our contention is that citizens rely on everyday notions of desert, but that these notions are not reliable – notions of desert are not objective, and notions of desert serve as bad bases for policymaking. Finally, we discuss how, for those with a strong belief in a just world, providing government aid, especially group-based opportunities is perceived as unfair. This leads to a set of testable hypotheses about the relationship between BJW and group perceptions. In particular, we hypothesize that citizens with a strong BJW will experience a systematic bias against seeing injustice in the world. However, because laws, rules and regulations are not seen as “actors,” that can be blamed, the object of justice or injustice focuses on individuals.

**Ubiquity of Desert Claims in Policy**

A quick internet search of the news (via google) for the terms “desert” and “policy,” yields more than 3,200 hits recorded in the last 24 hours (searched on 23 May 2011). Indeed, the Guardian writes “Gordon Brown and the IMF deserve better than this shabby treatment” (5/23/11) the Wall Street Journal opined that “Yesterday the Supreme Court ordered California to release 46,000 convicted criminals—people who society has decided, through a fair and impartial judicial system, are dangerous or deserve to be punished” and writing in an editorial for USA Today Allyson Schwartz (D-PA) writes “The threat of reduced [Medicare] payments is the least imaginative option and most unlikely to result in the kind of health care we know seniors and all Americans deserve.” [emphasis added in all cases] Were we to conduct this search on any other day, we have no doubt that we would see similar results.

It is noteworthy that all three of these statements found their way on to the editorial pages. Noteworthy but not surprising – opinion pages exercise more latitude – they do not just report the facts, opinion authors interpret the facts and assess them. In essence, they appraise the information and provide a judgment. Given the ubiquity of desert claims, little time is spent critically examining the
desert-basis in these opinion pieces. Even less time is spent examining biases in our notions of desert. This fact remains completely unexplored. It almost goes without saying that The Chancellor of the Exchequer and former Prime Minister deserve better treatment, criminals deserve punishment, older Americans deserve excellent health care. The diversity of claims is mindboggling.

Erroneous Desert

What if most of these desert claims are erroneous? How would we feel about them then? The psychological literature, both experimental and correlational, leaves us with few other conclusions to draw. As we show in figure 1, there is a pattern of desert that leaves individuals too likely to see the world as just. We start with a “desert event.” A desert event is any event where we instinctively make a judgment about the deservingness of the individual. John being fired is the beginning of a desert event. To ask whether John deserved to lose his job we must know something about the desert basis. Our appraising attitudes tell us about good (legitimate) and bad (illegitimate) desert bases. For example, if John deserved to lose his job because of his insubordination, we would use our appraisal of insubordination as being bad to determine that John's unemployment is deserved – so long as John held the attribute we would view his claim for unemployment benefits as illegitimate. If we believe John was insubordinate then we use this event to reinforce our belief in a just world. If, however, John was insubordinate because his supervisor asked him to materially compromise his job safety then John was unjustly fired. We now have a different choice. According to psychological theory we would attempt to generate a defense against this threat to our belief in a just world.

[insert figure 1 – about here]

In this situation, we can choose a variety of mechanisms to maintain our belief in a just world. In the case of John it is going to be difficult to deny that he is unemployed. We can, however avoid John and ignore the consequences – leaving our BJW more-or-less intact. We can compensate John – via unemployment insurance – however this compensation is inadequate, paying at most, half of John's lost income. If we fail to fully compensate, ignore or deny John's undeserved outcome, then we are left with two choices: blame John or revise our belief about the justice of the world. In most, cases people will blame John. They will argue that John being fired for insubordination was brought on by himself, that a person with more tact, or grace would have managed the situation better and not been fired. Ultimately, we come to believe that the fault is John's. The consequence of this is that supervisors are seen as less likely to act in capricious ways and in fact the employee is usually the problem.

Looking at figure 1 we can see that there are many paths that lead to reinforcing a belief in a just world. Only when all of these pathways are blocked do we succeed in re-evaluating our notions of desert. The consequences of this are profound. Each time we see a group of schoolchildren who fail to
achieve academically we search for ways to convince ourselves that the world is just. Women earn less than men? Latinos dropping out of high school? African American unemployment rates higher than whites? White men dying from heart attacks? We have constructed “reasons”\(^\text{1}\) for all of these, and most of our reasons are uninformed by the social science research. Instead we tend to derogate and blame the group that has the bad attribute. It is fascinating to watch – families inundated by the flooding Mississippi? Towns destroyed by tornadoes? Why would anyone choose to live there?

This brings us to our first conclusion. Desert claims are malleable and justificatory in nature. They have little ex ante value and what value the ever had is distorted by the psychological feedback mechanisms that people use to defend their belief in a just world. Consequently, they are a horrible basis on which to make policy. This does not change the fact that individuals regularly do use desert claims to argue their position. Nor is our research likely to influence that. However, we should be aware that these claims influence our public discourse about social policy. The hoary distinction between deserving and the undeserving in social policy provides no intellectual purchase on the issues of the day and only serves to reinforce preconceived biases. That said, there is no doubt that the provision of social benefits alters individual behavior. We may therefore, want to limit the provision of social benefits on these efficiency grounds, because altering individual behavior via moral hazard results in market inefficiencies.

\textit{Desert and Rules}

As discussed earlier, in order to defend a desert claim, we must argue that the agent X possesses the attribute that we deem deserving. We undermine the desert claim if the agent does not in fact hold the virtue that we deem worthy of desert. You cannot deserve a reward for hard work if you failed to work hard. What has not been examined is requirements are placed upon the agent. Is the agent in the statement \textit{X deserves P by virtue of b}, required to have taken an action? In many situations, this not the case. Merely possessing a characteristic is sufficient for desert. For example, Mary deserved the scholarship by virtue of being poor. However, if Mary had taken steps to ensure her own poverty then we would be less convinced of the fact that mere possession of the “virtue” warranted poverty. More interestingly, if Mary had made foolish decisions that lead to her poverty, this too would undermine her desert claim. It appears that having a characteristic implies people deserve things only by virtue of their having unavoidable attributes that they would have reasonably preferred not to possess.

One might ask about whether inanimate objects can deserve things: the painting deserved first

\(^1\) As social scientists we research the reasons for these phenomena, however in the absence of research we rely on our experience and the development of our appraising attitudes. Which as we discuss above are biased by the feedback effects that lead people to defend their belief in a just world.
prize, the invention deserved to be patented. Again, while this appears to be a common form of speech it is not clear that painting and inventions can deserve something. If the effect of deserving something is to provide a benefit (B) then we must ask how an inanimate object can realize its reward. Clearly animals deserve kind treatment – we believe and have evidence that they respond to the reward.

In general, although not exclusively, we reserve desert for people. People deserve things by virtue of what they do. Because of the psychology of defending our belief in a just world, we tend to derogate victims. One consequence is we derogate and blame groups of individuals when we hear about their poor performance. This leads us to our second proposition. Those who have strong beliefs in a just world will tend to blame the individuals (rather than the system) for their shortcomings. Since we cannot reasonably assign desert to “the system” we assign it to the group who came up short. This implies that desert necessarily focuses us away from systemic problems and toward individual or group based problems. Consequently, we are likely to see desert impact our attitudes about individual or groups, but are unlikely to see desert directly impacting peoples’ policy choices. In effect, this implies that desert is wholly mediated by group identity.

One final point before we conclude. It should be evident by now that desert is widely used as a rationale for determining the generosity and coverage of social policy. Because people with a strong belief in a just world are more likely to blame victims and engage in victim derogation, it seems clear that those with strong BJW are unlikely to see the systemic disadvantage faced by certain groups. As a consequence, it is likely that those with strong BJW will perceive policies that attempt to rectify historical injustices as problematic.

Conclusion

This manuscript develops a framework for understanding government’s efforts to protect the citizenry from risk. Our theory of social policy provision places desert and deservingness at the center of the discussion. Although we often speak in terms of desert and deservingness in everyday conversations, far too little effort has been made to provide a systematic theory of how deservingness relates to the willingness of society to provide social benefits. Although previous work examines how the social construction of target populations has a powerful influence on policy makers and shapes both the policy agenda and the design of policy, we take an important step back to identify the underlying psychological biases that drive our notions of desert. To do this, we develop a theory linking philosophical with social psychological conceptions of desert. In particular, we focus on the how an individual conception of fairness in the world is linked notions of desert, racial attitudes and social provision. We extend our theory to multiple groups and explain how public conceptions of desert mediate our evaluation of African-Americans and other group’s “worthiness” to receive social benefits.
Our understanding of these concepts lead us to hypothesize that citizens that view the world as just, will have a difficult time supporting policies aimed at correcting “injustices.” This difficulty will lead to the systematic exclusion of groups from social provision and coverage.

We provide two pillars of support for our contention that desert is often conflated with race. First, we argue that the whole enterprise of desert is fraught with problems. The construct of desert itself does not have and internally consistent set of principles that it uses to evaluate outcomes. Instead, it imports values and beliefs from outside the desert claim, (these are known as appraising attitudes) and uses them to evaluate the claim. Importantly, succeeding generations hold different appraising attitudes, giving rise to radical changes in concepts of desert. These large changes significantly undermine the potency of the desert claims as a justification for public policy.

Even if there were a set of appraising attitudes that could justify and maintain a consistent footing for desert claims, there would still be significant problems in using this concept in public policy. Our second pillar of support for the contention that desert is an invalid basis on which to justify government provision is social-psychological. Experimental research demonstrates that when faced with a threat to their just world beliefs, people often resort to victim derogation as a way to maintain their beliefs. This derogation occurs even when it has no rational basis and cannot be supported by the facts. Correlational research supports these finding across a number of policy areas. Consequently, people (especially those with a strong belief in just world) hold biased beliefs about desert – this bias is driven by the social-psychological mechanisms that reinterpret unjust outcomes in order to make them “appear” more just. This bias in updating our beliefs about the world lead people to assert that it is generally fairer than a purely objective analysis would admit.

These two issues - the malleability of appraising attitudes and the built-in bias of our assessment of just outcomes - lead us to conclude that making policy based on perceptions of desert is highly problematic. Yet we have also shown, and our experience supports, that notions of desert are ubiquitous in policymaking. In future research we hope to investigate this paradox – that desert claims are found everywhere in public policy and yet they are built on shoddy foundations and supported by delusional evidence. It may be that desert is an empty vessel into which we pour our preconceived notions of the world. If this is the case, then we should be wary of politicians and advocates who argue that we should adopt a particular policy because it is deserved.
Bibliography


Appendix I – Belief in a Just World Scales

Below we have included the original item from the Rubin & Peplau (1975) scale and the Dalbert (1987) scale. Both scales range from 1 to 6 with with scores 1 through 3 indicating degrees of disagreement and 4 through 6 indicating degrees of agreement.

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<td>1</td>
<td>strongly disagree</td>
<td>disagree</td>
<td>slightly disagree</td>
<td>slightly agree</td>
<td>agree</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
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The Rubin & Peplau scale includes items that are reverse coded (both “just” and “unjust” statements). Some psychometric research indicates that beliefs in a just world are not symmetric with respect to beliefs about the justice and injustice of the world. Consequently, the Dalbert scale is not reverse coded. For both scales, those with stronger beliefs in a just world have lower scale scores. Furnham (2003) in his review of the literature from the 1990s reports high reliability for both scales (based on previously published research). For Rubin and Peplau (1975) the Cronbach alphas are reported at .80 and .81. The Dalbert scale despite having fewer items also has high reliability - Cronbach alphas of .81 and .82. These high alphas are partly due to the lack of reverse coding. See Furnham (2003) for a full discussion of the scales reliability and psychometric validity.

Rubin & Peplau (1975)

1. I’ve found that a person rarely deserves the reputation he has. (U)
2. Basically, the world is a just place. (J)
3. People who get "lucky breaks" have usually earned their good fortune. (J)
4. Careful drivers are just as likely to get hurt in traffic accidents as careless ones. (U)
5. It is a common occurrence for a guilty person to get off free in American courts. (U)
6. Students almost always deserve the grades they receive in school. (J)
7. Men who keep in shape have little chance of suffering a heart attack. (J)
8. The political candidate who sticks up for his principles rarely gets elected. (U)
9. It is rare for an innocent man to be wrongly sent to jail. (J)
10. In professional sports, many fouls and infractions never get called by the referee. (U)
11. By and large, people deserve what they get. (J)
12. When parents punish their children, it is almost always for good reasons. (J)
13. Good deeds often go unnoticed and unrewarded. (U)
14. Although evil men may hold political power for a while, in the general course of history good wins out. (J)
15. In almost any business or profession, people who do their job well rise to the top. (J)
16. American parents tend to overlook the things most to be admired in their children. (U)
17. It is often impossible for a person to receive a fair trial in the USA. (U)
18. People who meet with misfortune have often brought it on themselves. (J)
19. Crime doesn't pay. (J)
20. Many people suffer through absolutely no fault of their own. (U)
Dalbert (1997) General Belief in a Just World Scale (GBJWS)

1. I think basically the world is a just place.
2. I believe that, by and large, people get what they deserve.
3. I am confident that justice always prevails over injustice.
4. I am convinced that in the long run people will be compensated for injustices.
5. I firmly believe that injustices in all areas of life (e.g., professional, family, politics) are the exception rather than the rule.
6. I think people try to be fair when making important decisions.