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Victim blaming and belief in karma

Cindel J. M. White[1] | **Aiyana K. Willard**[2]

[1]Department of Psychology, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

[2]Centre for Culture and Evolution, Department of Life Sciences, Brunel University London, Uxbridge, UK

Correspondence
Cindel J. M. White, Department of Psychology, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada.
Email: cjmwhite@yorku.ca

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Abstract

Witnessing the suffering of innocent victims can motivate observers to interpret the situation in ways that justify that suffering, such as viewing victims as more personally responsible or possessing negative traits. In a pre-registered cross-cultural experiment ($N = 831$ from India, Singapore and the USA), we tested whether belief in karma—a supernatural force that can be used to explain current misfortune as payback for past misdeeds—affects people's tendencies to blame victims for their misfortune. Participants read and evaluated descriptions of ostensibly innocent victims of misfortune, both before and after thinking about karma. When thinking about karma, participants rated victims as possessing more negative traits, and (in the USA) being less similar to participants themselves, compared to their baseline judgements. Belief in karma also indirectly predicted negative evaluations, due to karma believers' greater perception that victims were personally responsible for their situation. These results are consistent with previously established patterns of victim derogation and show how karma can shape social judgements in a manner that bolsters the perception of a just world where bad things are believed to happen to bad people.

KEYWORDS

belief in a just world, immanent justice, karma, victim blaming

1 | VICTIM BLAMING AND BELIEF IN KARMA

Most people desire to live in a world that is just, where misfortunes befall wrongdoers and good outcomes come to those who do good deeds, but the real world is full of bad things happening to good people, through no apparent fault of their own. Classic research on belief in a Just World (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Miller, 1978) argues that people are motivated to maintain a view that the world is just by re-appraising the suffering of ostensibly innocent victims to make bad experiences seem more deserved. This is done by derogating the victim or perceiving them as dissimilar from oneself, and therefore not subject to the fair processes that determine one's own life (Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Lerner & Simmons, 1966). This pattern of just-world motivation has been primarily documented in Western cultures, with some cross-cultural samples (e.g. Chobthamkit et al., 2022; Furnham, 1993; Grimes et al., 2015; Kaplan, 2012), as part of general motivational systems in secular participants. It can also be seen in religious traditions around the world that endorse various forms of cosmic justice (e.g. Baumard & Boyer, 2013; Pichon & Saroglou, 2009). Many people believe that the principle of karma causes good deeds to generate good outcomes, and bad deeds to generate bad outcomes, even across long time scales, across reincarnations and without the intervention of human agents of justice (White & Norenzayan, 2019). In this pre-registered experiment, in samples from India, Singapore and the United States, we tested whether thinking about karma affects believers' tendency to view innocent victims as personally blameworthy for their misfortunes, and whether it does so through processes of victim derogation and distancing

that are hallmarks of Westerners' strategy to maintain perceptions of fairness in misfortune.

1.1 | Evaluating misfortune

Previous studies have documented that many people are motivated to maintain their belief that the world is fair and just by their appraisals of and responses to other people's misfortunes (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). While misfortune befalling bad people can be satisfying and reassuring (Carlsmith & Darley, 2008; Feather & Sherman, 2002), bad things that happen to ostensibly innocent victims are threatening to people's expectations about a just world, especially when the victim's suffering is enduring and unable to be relieved by practical assistance from participants or other observers. In these cases, people can still maintain their view that the world is fair by re-appraising the victim and their situation in ways that make bad outcomes seem more justifiable.

There are two re-appraisal strategies that people typically take. Victim derogation is one effective strategy—even if the victim did not do anything at the moment to cause their misfortune, if they are perceived to generally have more negative personality traits they may be viewed as an appropriate recipient of misfortune in general. Past research has found that individuals who are especially high in dispositional belief in a Just World are more likely to derogate innocent victims, by perceiving them as less attractive, having less positive qualities and more negative characteristics (Bizer et al., 2012; Correia & Vala, 2003; Hafer, 2000; Mendonça et al., 2016; Tepe et al., 2020). A second strategy is to distance oneself from the victim, as a way to reassure oneself that even if bad things happened to someone else, one's own life outcomes can still be governed by fairness principles that ensure bad things only happen to bad people (Drout & Gaertner, 1994; Hafer, 2000; Lerner, 1980; Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2021). In line with this pattern, the victimization of ingroup members can be more threatening than the victimization of outgroup members, as indicated by greater victim derogation and disidentification with the victim's group (Aguiar et al., 2008; Correia et al., 2007), especially among participants high in belief in a just world (Correia et al., 2012, 2015; although other studies have instead documented greater perceived deservedness of outgroup victimization, Braman & Lambert, 2001; Lodewijkx et al., 2005).

This derogation and distancing from victims of misfortune, while satisfying various motivations for perceivers, is a form of secondary victimization and can further harm victims of misfortune. Many studies have documented that belief in a just world is associated with the attribution that victims are personally responsible for the good and bad things that have happened to them, including in ambiguous and complex circumstances like poverty, illness, or sexual assault, and these attributions of personal responsibility predict less willingness to help those in need (Adolfsson & Strömwall, 2017; Bizer et al., 2012; Braman & Lambert, 2001; Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Harper et al., 1990; Kaplan, 2012; Li et al., 2018; Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2021; Russell & Hand, 2017; Strömwall et al., 2013).

1.2 | Karmic sources of misfortune

Many religious traditions include belief in supernatural forces that maintain justice in the world, either through gods that observe and reward and punish moral behaviour or through cosmic forces like karma that achieve similar ends. Such beliefs in supernatural justice may reflect evolved intuitions about fairness and proportionality (Baumard & Boyer, 2013), be compelling and readily adopted by people as a way to satisfy fundamental motives for control and certainty (Laurin & Kay, 2017) and provide adaptive benefits to social groups by encouraging prosocial and discouraging antisocial behaviour (Norenzayan et al., 2016). As such, supernatural justice beliefs provide explicit, culturally reinforced, expectations that misfortune is typically due to a person's past bad behaviour, but with the added benefit that justice can be ensured without the intervention of human punishers or mundane causal processes.

This expectation is especially central to belief in karma, a law of cause and effect through which (im) moral actions have morally congruent outcomes, both within one's current lifetime and, within the religious conception of karma, across multiple lifetimes and across the cycle of reincarnation (Bronkhorst, 2011). Karma is central to the worldview of several Asian religious traditions, including Hinduism and Buddhism, while also being endorsed among many people in Western Christian and non-religious populations. Beliefs about karma may partly reflect intuitions about fairness that arise from general belief in a just world (Baumard & Chevallier, 2012), but individual differences in belief in karma and belief in a just world are only moderately correlated (Chobthamkit et al., 2022; White, Norenzayan, et al., 2019), and explicit belief in karma is also shaped by particular religious cultures and cognitive tendencies that foster supernatural beliefs (White et al., 2021; White & Norenzayan, 2019). Across different cultural contexts karmic beliefs vary in intensity, being more widely endorsed and deeply embedded in everyday life and religion in Asian Hindu- and Buddhist-dominated cultures than in Western Christian-heritage cultures. Different communities also vary in which specific moral actions or rituals are most likely to generate karmic outcomes (Daniel & Keyes, 1983; Fuller, 2004). But a core element of karma belief, consistently endorsed in both Eastern and Western samples, is that people who explicitly report high belief in karma (rather than merely expecting

fairness in interpersonal situations) are especially likely to perceive causal connections between past misdeeds and current misfortune, and with the expectation that current moral behaviour determines future outcomes (Taylor et al., 2022; White et al., 2020; White, Norenzayan, et al., 2019). In the present experiment, we investigate how thinking about karma is associated with responses to innocent victims of misfortune.

One possibility is that karma could increase tendencies to view victims of misfortune as blameworthy and personally responsible for their misfortunes, much as generalized beliefs about a just world encourage victim blaming and subsequently lead to victim derogation and distancing. Karma may actually be more likely to generate these responses than merely secular sources of justice because the law of karma allows long time delays between a person's misdeed and the eventual karmic repercussion. The causal opacity and time delay of karma means that even if the victim is ostensibly innocent, with no immediate apparent responsibility for their misfortune, they can still be held responsible due to some misdeed in the distant past that is only now producing karmic fruits. Belief in karmic causality across multiple reincarnations allows even the suffering of young children or consistently virtuous adults to be perceived as a fair payback, for moral transgressions committed in a past lifetime. For example, Cotterill et al. (2014) documented that Indians who more strongly endorse belief in karma were also more likely to endorse the perception that inequalities due to the social caste people are born into are more legitimate, and karma believers were less supportive of policies to alleviate caste-based discrimination, consistent with other evidence that religious systems can legitimate and reinforce societal inequalities (Jost et al., 2014). While previous studies have documented that belief in karma predicts attributions of personal responsibility for misfortune, little is known about the downstream consequences of these attributions for social judgements or behaviour towards victims of misfortune, which we focus on in this study. It is also an open question how strongly and frequently karma believers will engage in victim blaming. Even though karmic causality across reincarnations means that believers always *could* attribute someone's misfortune to their prior misdeeds, it does not guarantee that they will always do so, perhaps especially when they are salient proximate, external causes for their suffering.

Alternatively, belief in karma may instead lead to more warm, generous responses to the suffering of others, as part of a general tendency for reminders of karma to encourage prosocial behaviour (White, Kelly, et al., 2019; Willard et al., 2020). By doing good deeds, including treating others with kindness and helping those in need, karma believers expect that they can increase their own likelihood of future good experiences (White & Norenzayan, 2022), a motive that may be especially salient when facing important events beyond their personal control (Converse et al., 2012). Insofar as treating victims of misfortune with compassion and kindness is expected to generate good karmic merit, reminders of karma may actually reduce harsh responses to suffering victims, resulting in a different pattern of results than what was previously found when studying Just World Beliefs.

1.3 | Cultural variability in karma belief and attributional styles

Much of the core logic of karmic causality—that good deeds beget eventual good outcomes, and bad deeds bad outcomes—is shared across many religious and cultural groups around the world (Bronkhorst, 2011; Obeyesekere, 2002; White, Norenzayan, et al., 2019). But karma has a different role in the religious cultures of different populations and may interact with broader cultural differences in attributions or responses to the suffering of strangers. To test the generalizability of our effects across cultural groups, we conducted the experiment simultaneously with Hindu participants from India, Buddhists from Singapore, and a general sample from the USA (not filtered based on religion). All participants were English-speaking computer users from countries with moderate levels of income inequality. However, belief in karma is stronger and more deeply embedded in local religious traditions and everyday life among Indian and Singaporean samples than in the USA (Daniel & Keyes, 1983; Fuller, 2004; White et al., 2021; White, Norenzayan, et al., 2019; Willard et al., 2020). For example, Hindu and Buddhist traditions describe the process of karma as unfolding across the cycle of reincarnation (not merely within one's current life), such that a person's family and social status at birth, caste, health and other seemly uncontrollable life circumstances can all be explained as the result of one's deeds in a past lifetime. Different religious traditions also promote different rituals and interpersonal behaviours as means to increase one's good karma and offset past bad deeds. These different cultural embeddings of karma may impact the effectiveness of the karma framing manipulation used in these studies.

Patterns of victim blaming may also vary across populations because of differences in attributional styles between these cultures. Participants from the United States tend to be more willing to focus on internal explanations for all sorts of behaviours, including misfortune (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Ross, 1977), whereas Indian and East Asian participants are more likely to attribute circumstances to the situation rather than the person (e.g. Choi & Nisbett, 1998; Miller, 1984; Miyamoto & Kitayama, 2002; Morris & Peng, 1994; Norenzayan et al., 2002). For example, United States participants are more likely to make internal

TABLE 1 Demographic details of focal samples.

	India	Singapore	USA
N	317	311	203
Gender	36% women, 64% men	44% women, 56% men	55% women, 43% Men, 1% non-binary, 1% not provided
Age (M [range])	30.48 [18–64]	36.09 [18–70]	38.14 [19–74]
Education (>high school)	88%	65%	65%
Median income	Rs 7,50,001–Rs 10,00,000	$10,000–$11,999	$50,000–$59,999
Belief in karma (M [SD] on a 7-point scale)	5.38 (1.21)	4.91 (1.01)	4.98 (0.69)
Religion	100% Hindu	100% Buddhist	12% Catholic Christian, 26% Protestant or other Christian, 52% Non-religious, atheist, or agnostic, 2% Hindu, 4% Buddhist, 4% other denominations

attributions for poverty and they show relatively low support for redistribution (Piff et al., 2020), whereas Indian youths were more likely to accept structural than individualistic explanations for poverty (Nasser et al., 2005). North Americans, compared to East Asians, are also especially likely to show self-enhancing biases in social perception (Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Kitayama et al., 1997), which may make them especially motivated to derogate and distance themselves from victims of misfortune as a way to defend their view of themselves as good people subject to just processes. We, therefore, tested whether responses to victims of misfortune differed between Indian Hindus, Singaporean Buddhists and Americans, to look at if the potential victim blaming and derogation effects of karma are somewhat weaker in our Asian samples.

1.4 | Overview of current studies

In this pre-registered cross-cultural experiment, we investigated how thinking about karma affects evaluations of innocent victims, among Indian Hindus, Singaporean Buddhists, and Americans. In a within-subjects design, participants first read about a person who experienced a traumatic event that caused enduring suffering through no obvious fault of their own and then had the opportunity to engage in victim blaming by rating the target on several dimensions: (1) whether the target has positive and negative personality traits, (2) the target's responsibility for their own misfortune and (3) the participants' feeling that the victim is similar to themselves. Participants were then explicitly instructed to think about karma before completing the same task again with a new target. In addition, we measured individual differences in belief in karma, belief in a just world and other religious beliefs, so that we could further investigate whether there is any consistent relationship between individual differences in karmic beliefs and victim blaming, or whether harsher judgements of victims appear when karma believers are actively thinking about karma when judging misfortune.

2 | METHODS

Prior to conducting this study, the sampling strategy, methods and planned analyses were preregistered on the Open Science Framework. Full details of the preregistration, all measures and manipulations and the data from all studies can be accessed at https://osf.io/axt82/. All study methods were approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia.

2.1 | Participants

We aimed to recruit a sample of approximately 300 Hindu participants from India, 300 Buddhist participants from Singapore (via Qualtrics's online panels) and 600 participants from the USA (any religious denomination, via CloudResearch's panel of approved participants). Because we wanted the focal analysis to primarily consist of participants who believe in karma, we intentionally oversampled in the USA, expecting that approximately half of the American sample would be karma believers (included in the focal analyses), whereas the majority of Hindu Indians and Buddhist Singaporeans were likely to be karma believers. The final sample excluded participants who failed to complete the survey did not correctly answer 'If you know how to speak English, please select five as your answer to this question', failed a CAPTCHA, or reported that they did not pay attention, did not take the survey seriously or were otherwise distracted while completing the survey. We recruited new participants until we reached the final desired sample size after exclusions. Additional participants, beyond our target minimum, were recruited prior to ending data collection, to

ensure we would have sufficient sample size after exclusion. Following pre-registered criteria, we retained these additional participants in the final sample, resulting in final samples that were slightly larger than our targets (no analyses were performed prior to finalizing the focal data set).

The final sample after exclusions consisted of 317 Hindu Indians, 311 Buddhist Singaporeans and 788 participants from the United States, of whom 203 reported belief in karma and therefore made up our focal US sample (see Table 1 for full demographic details). This final sample size had at least 80% power to correlations of $r>0.09$ within the whole sample, or $r>0.19$ within each country, and between-condition differences of $d>0.09$ across the whole sample or $d>0.19$ within each country.

2.2 | Materials and procedure

2.2.1 | Baseline judgements

After providing consent, participants read a description of a target character who experienced misfortune. These descriptions were adapted from prior studies that tested responses to ostensible-innocent victims, such as a child who lost both arms because of encountering an electric cable at an unprotected construction site (Correia et al., 2007), a young woman who was sexually assaulted by a boy she met at a party, a woman who is robbed by a stranger after taking the bus home late at night (van Prooijen & van den Bos, 2009), or a university student who is paralysed after being hit by a drunk driver (Correia et al., 2012). We edited the exact wording so that all vignettes described the misfortune in the third person and were of approximately equal length, but kept the same structure of events as in prior studies. In each case, the victim did not directly cause the negative outcome and experienced enduring suffering due to physical and emotional trauma.

After reading this description, participants rated the target and their situation on several dimensions. Participants first rated whether the situation was 'severe' (1=*not at all* to 9=*extremely*) and 'the likelihood that [target] will continue to suffer in the future' (1=*extremely unlikely* to 9=*extremely likely*). They then rated their impression of the target through how strongly the target is characterized by five positive personality traits (polite, responsible, mature, nice and warm, $\alpha\geq0.83$), and five negative personality traits (stupid, selfish, careless, arrogant and deceitful; 1=*not at all* to 9=*a lot*, $\alpha\geq0.85$), as well as their 'overall impression of [target]' (1=*extremely negative* to 9=*extremely positive*). Ratings of positive and negative traits were only weakly correlated ($r=0.08$), and positive traits were only moderately correlated with positive impressions ($r=0.59$), therefore, we analysed these variables separately. Participants directly reported whether they characterized the target's situation as *completely unjust* (1) to *completely just* (9). They then reported to what extent the target was responsible for the situation they are in, through six items referring to personal responsibility in general (e.g. 'I believe that what happened to him [her] was caused by his [her] own behavior' and 'I think he [she] has been very careless', $\alpha\geq0.92$), and two items referring to causality from past lifetimes (e.g. 'I believe that what happened to him [her] was caused by his [her] behavior in a previous lifetime', $\alpha\geq0.88$, the correlation between current and past life responsibility, $r=0.67$). Finally, participants reported how similar to distant from the target they feel across four items (e.g. 'To what extent do you think [target] is like you?' and 'How likely is it that a similar situation might happen to you?' $\alpha\geq0.84$).

2.2.2 | Karma-framed judgements

After reading and evaluating one vignette, all participants were instructed to think about karma before evaluating a second target, randomly chosen from the set of victims they had not previously seen. We told participants that 'We want you next to think about karma. We will ask you to make several more judgments about a different person, but before you make each response please think about karma. Make your responses based on what your belief in the law of karma would lead you to think.' These direct manipulations are consistent with explicit requests encountered in the real world, to think about karma or other supernatural forces while making social decisions, and prior research indicates that over-instructions to make decisions in line with one's supernatural beliefs exert similar effects as subtler instructions to simply think about karma (or God, see Pasek et al., 2023; White, Kelly, et al., 2019; White, Norenzayan, et al., 2019).

Participants then read a new vignette about a new character who experienced misfortune and evaluated this second target on the same questions as before, except that the questions about positive/negative traits and responsibility began with the prompt 'After considering karma…' as a way to remind participants to continue thinking about krama while making their decisions.

2.2.3 | Other beliefs and demographics

After completing these questionnaires, participants completed additional measures of their personal religious beliefs, including God belief, karma belief (7 items, $\alpha=0.86$, adapted from White, Norenzayan, et al., 2019), spirituality, religiosity, religious attendance, social exposure to karma, belief in a just world (comprised of 14 items taken from both the general belief in a just world scale, Dalbert et al., 1987, and personal belief in a just world scale, Lipkus et al., 1996, $\alpha=0.92$), socioeconomic

status (subjective SES, education, income, and resource insecurity) and COVID-related fears and stressors.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Analysis strategy

Primary analyses were performed as multilevel regression models that predicted each dependent measure from belief in karma (centred), karma frame condition (dummy coded with the control framing as the reference group) and the interaction between belief and karma frame, to test whether the effect of the manipulation differs across participants' level of belief. We performed all analyses collapsed across samples from all three countries (with fixed effects of the country included as a covariate of the model), as well as separately for participants from each country, to explore possible cross-cultural differences. Models included random intercepts for participants, to account for the repeated measures design. We also conducted parallel models with individual differences in belief in a just world, rather than belief in karma, in the model as a potential predictor of each outcome. Full model output is available in the Appendix S1.

3.2 | Responsibility for outcome

We first tested whether karma increases willingness to see victims as personally responsible for their outcomes (both in general and specifically due to behaviour in a past life, in separate models). In models aggregated across all three countries (Table 2 and Figure 1), belief in karma was strongly associated with the rating that the victim was more personally responsible for their situation, and even more strongly with the rating that the victim's circumstance was caused by behaviour in a past life. However, thinking about karma only slightly increased responsibility ratings and did not significantly increase past life responsibility, except for small increases at very high levels of karma belief. Looking separately for each country (Figure 1), only the relation between belief in karma and responsibility was robust within each sample (*bs* range from 0.25 [Singapore] to 0.82 [USA] for responsibility and from 0.66 [Singapore] to 1.16 [USA] for past life responsibility). Still, this does give some evidence that these effects are driven by belief in karma, rather than a third variable associated with karmic believers.

There were also mean differences between countries, such that participants in the USA rated the target as significantly less responsible in general, and due to past life behaviour, compared to participants in India or Singapore.

3.3 | Positive impressions

The next set of models predicted victim derogation through three separate measures (positive impressions, positive traits and negative traits) in three separate models. In models aggregated across all three countries, depicted in Table 3 and Figure 2, belief in karma predicted more positive impressions, more positive traits as well as more negative traits ascribed to each victim. The karma framing manipulation modified these effects: Thinking about karma led to more negative impressions, less positive traits and slightly more negative traits. The interaction between belief and frame condition was not significant in any case.

When looking at each country separately, belief in karma similarly predicted more positive impressions and positive traits (although not significantly in the USA) and significantly more negative traits in all three countries. The karma frame also elicited less positive impressions, $b_{USA} = -0.21$ [−0.47, 0.06], $p = 0.13$, $b_{India} = -0.38$ [−0.63, −0.13], $p = 0.003$, $b_{Singapore} = -0.39$ [−0.62, −0.15], $p = 0.001$ and less positive traits, $b_{USA} = -0.35$ [−0.58, −0.13], $p = 0.002$, $b_{India} = -0.25$ [−0.43, −0.08], $p = 0.004$, $b_{Singapore} = -0.33$ [−0.49, −0.17], $p < 0.001$, although thinking about karma did not significantly affect negative traits in any sample, $bs < 0.014$, $p > 0.12$. There were also mean differences between countries, such that participants in Singapore rated the victim as making a less

TABLE 2 Results of models predicting responsibility for the situation from belief in karma, moderated by karma frame condition and aggregated across all countries.

	Responsibility (general)		Responsibility (past life)	
Predictors	***b* (95% CI)**	***p***	***b* (95% CI)**	***p***
Intercept	5.52 (5.32, 5.72)	<0.001	5.04 (4.80, 5.28)	<0.001
Belief in karma	0.47 (0.34, 0.61)	<0.001	0.81 (0.66, 0.95)	<0.001
Karma frame	0.16 (0.00, 0.31)	0.045	0.11 (−0.01, 0.24)	0.081
Belief × frame	0.08 (−0.07, 0.23)	0.301	0.13 (0.01, 0.25)	0.039
Country (Singapore)	−0.11 (−0.38, 0.16)	0.406	−0.52 (−0.85, −0.19)	0.002
Country (USA)	−1.72 (−2.02, −1.42)	<0.001	−2.26 (−2.62, −1.89)	<0.001
Marginal R^2/conditional R^2	0.175/0.485		0.266/0.745	

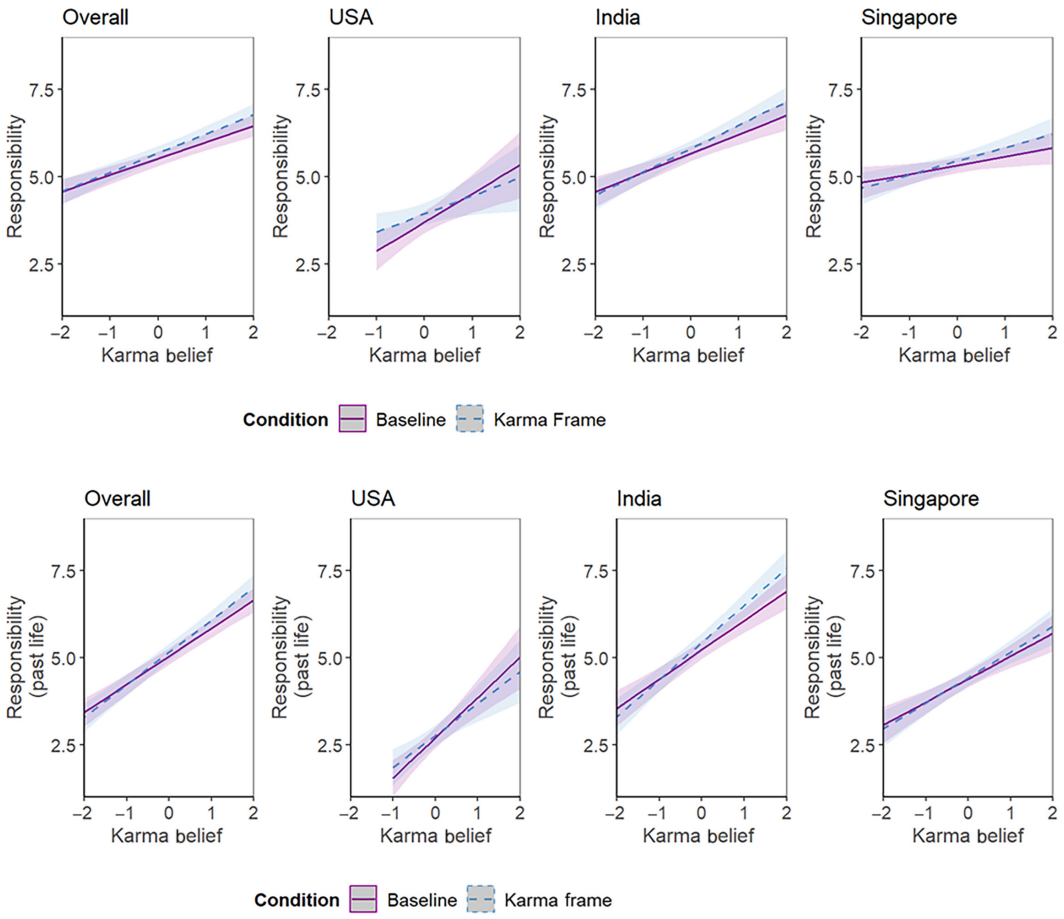

FIGURE 1 Association (with 95% confidence bands) between belief in karma and ratings that the victim was responsible for the situation, moderated by karma frame condition, aggregated separately across all countries. Upper panel, responsibility in general; lower panel, responsibility due to behaviour in a past life.

positive impression, having less positive traits, than participants in India and the USA, and participants in the USA rated the victims as having less negative traits, than did participants in India or Singapore.

3.4 | Similarity

The final set of models predicted participants' perceived similarity to the victim. In models aggregated across all three countries (Table 2 and Figure 3), belief in karma predicted higher ratings of similarity to the victim, but the karma frame decreased perceived similarity to the victim, with no significant interaction between belief and frame condition. However, this karma frame effect was largely driven by participants in the United States, where thinking about karma substantially decreased perceived similarity to the victim, $b=-0.41$ [−0.70, −0.11], $p=0.006$, whereas there was little effect of the karma frame in India, $b=-0.03$ [−0.20, 0.14], $p=0.73$, or Singapore, $b=-0.08$ [−0.27, 0.11], $p=0.41$. The association between belief in karma and greater similarity to the victim was only significant in India, $b=0.65$ [0.48, 0.83], $p<0.001$. On average, participants in India also rated themselves as significantly more similar to the victim, compared to participants from the USA, $b=-1.32$ [−1.63, −1.01], or Singapore, $b=-1.43$ [−1.71, −1.15], $p<0.001$.

3.5 | Belief in a just world

We ran additional models that had the same structure, by predicting outcomes from individual differences in belief in a just world (moderated by karma frame), rather than from belief in karma. The pattern of results (available in Tables S10–S15) was similar to the previous analyses, such that in the combined analysis, the karma frame slightly increased ratings of responsibility, $b=0.16$ [0.00, 0.31], $p=0.047$, reduced positive impressions, $b=-0.43$ [−0.48, −0.19], and positive traits, $b=-0.31$ [−0.41, −0.20], $p<0.001$, and increased negative traits, $b=0.12$ [0.01, 0.23], $p=0.032$, and reduced similarity, $b=-0.14$ [−0.26, −0.02], $p=0.020$.

At the level of individual differences, participants who more strongly endorse just world beliefs were more likely to view the victim as personally responsible for their circumstances, $b=0.59$ [0.43, 0.75], including responsible due to behaviour in a past life, $b=0.80$ [0.62,

TABLE 3 Results of models predicting impressions and similarity from belief in karma, moderated by karma frame condition and aggregated across all countries.

	Positive impression		Positive traits		Negative traits		Similarity	
Predictors	***b* [95% CI]**	***p***	***b* [95% CI]**	***p***	***b* [95% CI]**	***p***	***b* [95% CI]**	***p***
Intercept	6.84 (6.66, 7.02)	<0.001	6.35 (6.19, 6.51)	<0.001	4.85 (4.66, 5.04)	<0.001	5.81 (5.60, 6.01)	<0.001
Belief in karma	0.42 (0.30, 0.54)	<0.001	0.40 (0.30, 0.50)	<0.001	0.36 (0.23, 0.48)	<0.001	0.42 (0.29, 0.55)	<0.001
Karma frame	−0.34 (−0.48, −0.19)	<0.001	−0.31 (−0.41, −0.20)	<0.001	0.12 (0.01, 0.23)	0.032	−0.14 (−0.26, −0.02)	0.020
Belief×frame	−0.11 (−0.25, 0.02)	0.103	0.00 (−0.10, 0.10)	0.951	0.07 (−0.03, 0.18)	0.179	0.05 (−0.06, 0.17)	0.377
Country (Singapore)	−1.14 (−1.38, −0.90)	<0.001	−0.98 (−1.19, −0.76)	<0.001	−0.26 (−0.52, 0.00)	0.053	−1.43 (−1.71, −1.15)	<0.001
Country (USA)	0.13 (−0.14, 0.39)	0.344	−0.2 (−0.44, 0.04)	0.107	−1.93 (−2.22, −1.63)	<0.001	−1.32 (−1.63, −1.01)	<0.001
Marginal R^2/conditional R^2	0.148/0.427		0.161/0.583		0.200/0.691		0.174/0.671	

0.98], $p<0.001$. Just world belief was also positively associated with greater positive impressions, $b=0.58$ [0.43, 0.72], positive traits, $b=0.55$ [0.43, 0.67], and negative traits, $b=0.37$[0.23, 0.52], and greater perceived similarity to the victim, $b=0.42$ [0.26, 0.57], $ps<0.001$. Just world belief did not significantly moderate the karma framing effect across these models.

3.6 | Indirect associations between belief in karma and outcomes via perceived responsibility

The results of these pre-registered models present inconsistencies between relations with belief in karma, such as a positive relation between belief in positive impressions, but also greater attributions of responsibility, and exploratory analyses replicated the previously documented pattern that attributions of greater responsibility predicted more negative evaluations of the victims. To better understand the association between belief in karma and various responses to innocent victims, we used a path model to assess whether there is an indirect association between belief in karma and evaluations of the victim, via perceptions of responsibility for causing the outcome.

As depicted in Figure 4, in the combined analysis, there is a negative indirect association between belief in karma and impressions, indirect effect $b=-0.14$ [−0.18, −0.11], $p<0.001$ and positive indirect association between belief in karma and negative traits, indirect effect $b=0.39$ [0.32, 0.46], $p<0.001$, due to people who strongly believe in karma being more likely to view the victim as responsible, and responsibility predicted less positive impressions and more negative traits. A similar pattern appeared when each country was analysed separately.

The indirect association between karma and positive trait ratings was non-significant in the overall analysis, $p=0.12$. Only in the USA did perceived responsibility predict less positive trait ratings, $b=-0.15$ [−0.21, −0.08], $p<0.001$, resulting in a negative indirect effect, $b=-0.10$ [−0.16, −0.04], $p=0.002$. Likewise, only in the USA did responsibility predict less similarity to the victim, $b=-0.11$ [−0.02, −0.02], $p=0.018$, resulting in a negative indirect effect, $b=-0.07$ [−0.14, 0.00], $p=0.041$. In contrast, responsibility predicted more positive traits and greater similarity in India, $ps<0.041$ and was not significantly associated with either outcome in Singapore, $ps>0.36$. The same pattern of path results was also found when simultaneously predicting responsibility from karma belief, belief in a just world and COVID-related fears and stressors, all of which predicted higher ratings of responsibility, and thereby indirectly predicted more negative judgements of the victim (see Table S9). These results suggest that belief in karma can have both positive direct and negative indirect effects on victim derogation, although these patterns appear most strongly in the United States.

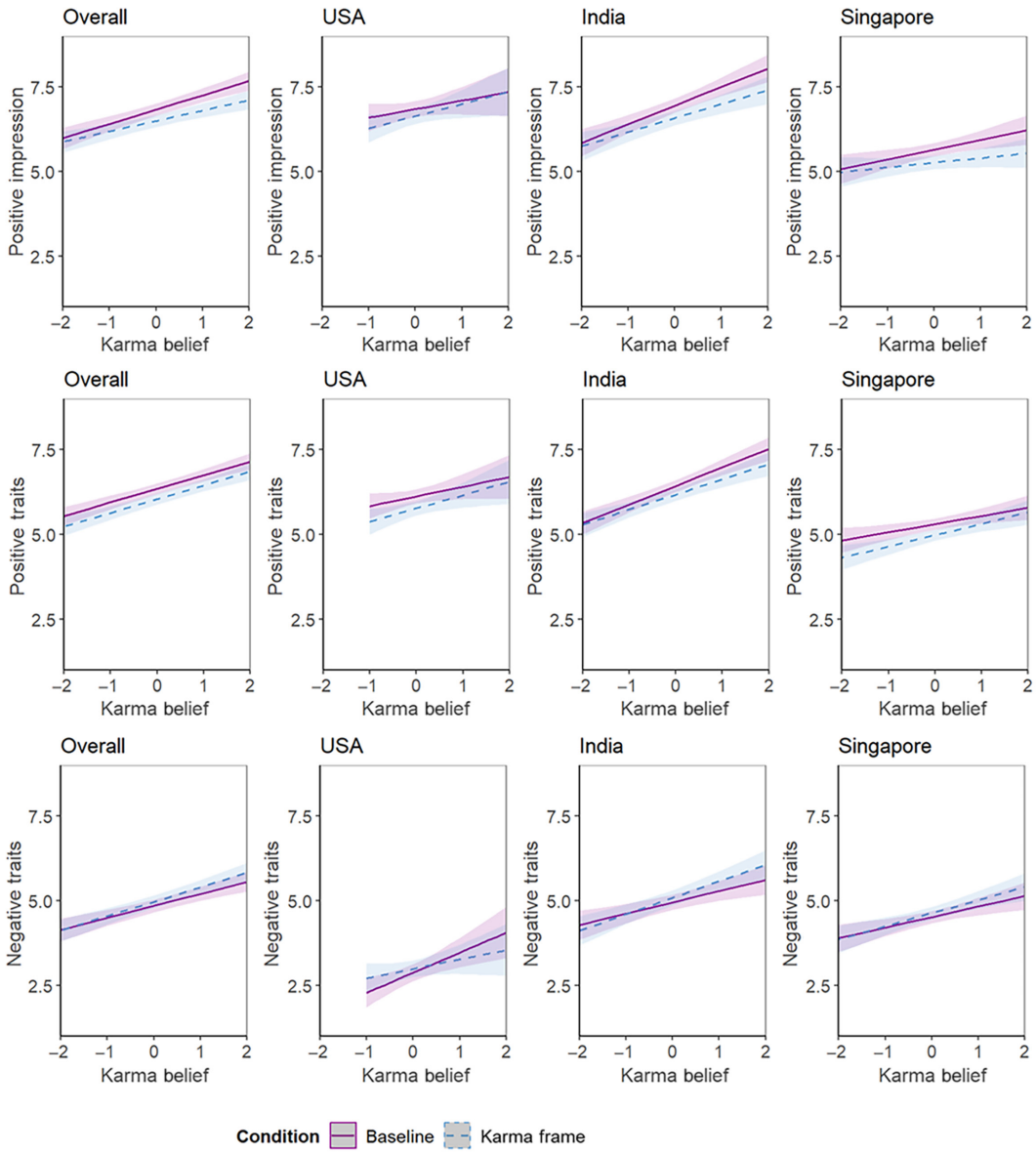

FIGURE 2 Association (with 95% confidence bands) between belief in karma and views of the victim, moderated by karma frame condition, aggregated and separately for each country. Upper, positive impressions; middle, positive traits; lower, negative traits.

4 | DISCUSSION

This study revealed that reminders of karma can increase willingness to blame and derogate victims of misfortune in samples from the USA, India and Singapore. Even though the vignettes did not mention any reckless or immoral behaviour that directly led to their misfortune, when thinking about karma, participants rated victims as possessing less positive personality traits, consistent with just world-motivated patterns of victim derogation. Participants in the USA also rated the victim as less similar to themselves, consistent with the motive to view victims as subject to different forces than oneself. Both of these responses have been documented in secular cultural contexts as a way that people maintain the view that the world is just, even when bad things happen to ostensibly innocent people (Bizer et al., 2012; Correia & Vala, 2003; Hafer, 2000; Mendonça et al., 2016; Tepe et al., 2020). The present findings indicate that beliefs about karma can elicit similar justice motives, which may have negative impacts on responses to people in need.

This supports the possibility that just world motivations may underly the intuitive appeal of karma belief, both in the religions that support karma and in the ease with which this idea has spread beyond these religious borders. In cultural contexts like many Asian countries, where ideas about karma have been historically prevalent and widespread in everyday life, belief in karma may have culturally evolved as a means to justify and perpetuate social inequalities, by making unequal outcomes in wealth, health and status explicable and acceptable

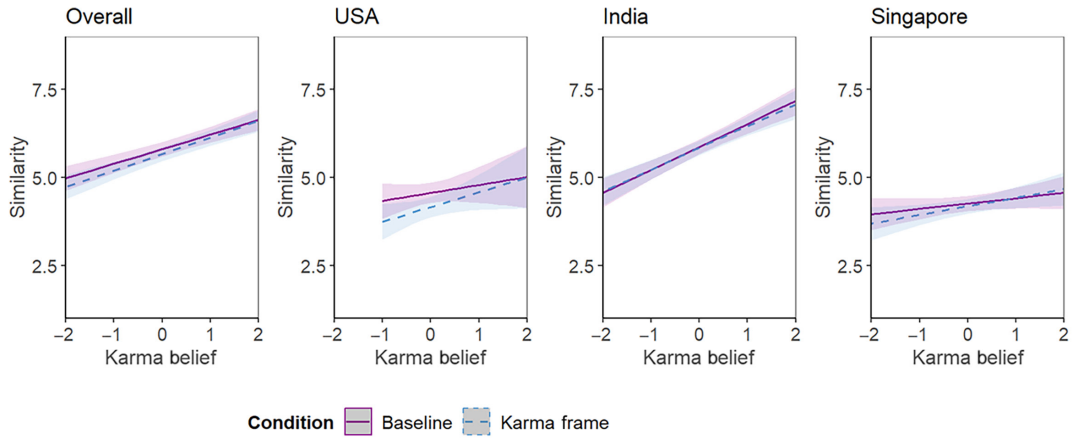

FIGURE 3 Association (with 95% confidence bands) between belief in karma and perceived similarity to the victim, moderated by karma frame condition, aggregated and separately for each country.

as the deserved outcomes for past misfortune (Cotterill et al., 2014). Karmic beliefs may also continue to spread to new populations of believers, including to growing numbers of spiritual-but-not-religious Westerners, because it satisfies these personal motives to find justice in otherwise inexplicable misfortune. These personal justice motives likely contribute to the enduring plausibility of these supernatural beliefs, which contributes to their spread alongside additional group-level benefits as karmic beliefs also encourage people to behave less selfishly and more generously towards others, in order to garner karmic rewards for themselves (Fitouchi & Singh, 2022; Laurin & Kay, 2017).

However, in this study, the association between karma and the derogation of innocent victims were modest in magnitude and most robust for the karma framing effect, not merely individual differences in karma belief. The belief in karmic forces that punish bad deeds with misfortune does not imply that believers will always engage in victim blaming and derogation. There was a robust indirect association between belief and derogation, such that participants who more strongly believe in karma rated the victim as more personally responsible for their misfortune (due to behaviour in this life or a previous lifetime) and perceived responsibility for the misfortune predicted less positive impressions and more negative traits. However, the direct relationships were more ambiguous. Merely looking at the correlation between individual differences in belief in karma and ratings of victims leads to inconsistent relationships: Participants who believe more strongly in karma were more likely to rate the victim as possessing negative personality traits, but they were also more likely to rate the victim as possessing positive personality traits and making a positive impression. However, when actively thinking about karma, karma believers' ratings of victims became less positive than they were previously. This pattern is consistent with the dual nature of karma belief as something that can both explain someone else's suffering (as due to their bad behaviour) and also encourage one's own prosocial, empathic responses towards other people (as a way to accrue positive karmic merit for oneself). The precise relationship between karma and prosocial/antisocial behaviour is therefore likely to vary across contexts, depending on what specific motives are most salient.

Belief in karma may be most likely to encourage victim blaming in situations where a victim's past misdeeds or negative personality traits are highly salient, such as when observers are aware that a victim's current suffering resembles past suffering they have caused to others (e.g. Taylor et al., 2022; White et al., 2020; White, Norenzayan, et al., 2019). Previous studies reveal that in these cases, people who believe in karma are especially likely to perceive a victim's past bad behaviour as causally connected to current misfortune, even if there is no obvious causal connection between the two events through mundane, naturalistic processes. But in the absence of salient negative characteristics that make victims especially deserving of their suffering, karma believers are not especially likely to blame or derogate victims compared to non-believers.

Future studies could provide a more rigorous experimental test of the situations where karma is more versus less likely to generate attributions of personal responsibility for misfortune, such as comparing karmic attributions in response to more neutral scenarios where no serious misfortunes occur (where karmic attributions and negative impressions should be less common), to scenarios where misfortune befalls innocent victims (as in the present study), to scenarios where misfortune befalls victims who are known to have committed past misdeeds (where karmic attributions and negative impressions should be especially common). It would also be valuable to conduct future studies that rely on different methods of manipulating karmic thinking. Our manipulation was very explicit, but karma framing effects were only modest in size, perhaps due to these beliefs being chronically accessible for karma believers and therefore less likely to

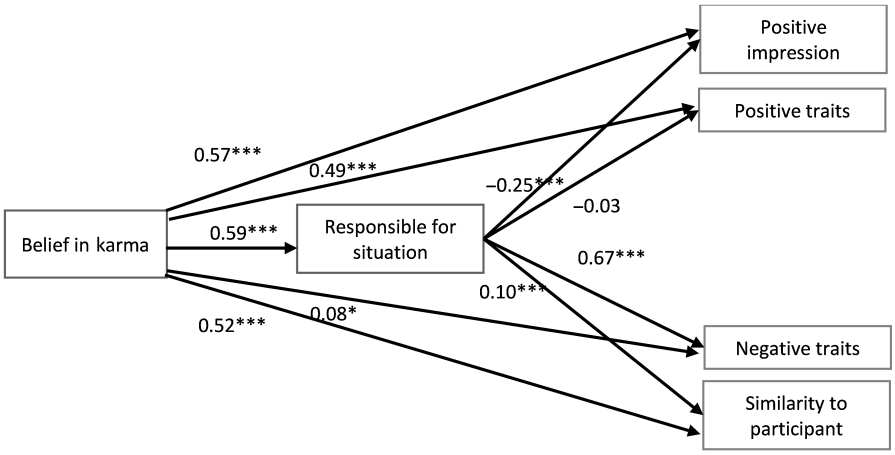

FIGURE 4 Path model predicting ratings of the victim from perceived responsibility for misfortune and belief in karma. Path coefficients come from a model aggregated across all countries (see Appendix S1 for further model results for each country). *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

change by experimental manipulations. Another possibility is that the set of dependent measures used in the first round of judgements, which included items about justice and responsibility for the misfortune, may have primed karmic ideas for all participants and therefore weakened the novel effect of the experimental manipulation on the second round of judgements. Future research may benefit from relying on other experimental designs that ask a narrower range of questions (about the victim's personality traits) or rely on a between-subjects manipulation, to potentially increase the karma framing effect size. Future research could also investigate whether subtler or more naturalistic reminders of karma evoke similar effects as observed using this study's overt manipulation.

4.1 | Karma vs. belief in a just world

We also measured participants' more secular beliefs that the world is just and gives people what they deserve, as another individual difference implicated in victim blaming processes. Belief in karma and belief in a just world are strongly but imperfectly correlated as individual differences ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.001$ in the whole sample, $r = 0.41$ in the USA, $r = 0.41$ in Singapore, $r = 0.69$ in India), and explicit belief in karma has distinct patterns of cross-cultural variation, being widespread in some populations and largely absent in others. But in the present studies, belief in karma and more generalized beliefs about a just world seemed to reflect similar motives that can lead to victim derogation. Narratives about karma may provide one culturally supported way to reassure believers that their efforts and prosociality will be justly rewarded with good outcomes and to legitimate societal inequalities through which some people thrive while others want. The unique elements of karmic causality—which can play out across long timescales and across cycles of reincarnation—may actually make karma a better way of understanding suffering, because it can explain why harm happens to seemingly innocent victims through no immediate fault of their own. However, these karmic expectations play on many of the same psychological processes that are at work in secular justice concerns, including the perception that those who experience misfortune probably have some personal faults that make them susceptible.

4.2 | Variation across countries

We tested the results across samples from the USA, India and Singapore, and often found similar patterns, despite previously documented differences in attributional styles and the cultural histories of karma beliefs in these countries. In all three countries, belief in karma was positively correlated with perceiving the victim as more responsible for their situation, and reminders of karma decreased positive trait ascriptions. However, the relationship with perceived similarity to the victim was more variable across countries: Only in the United States did thinking about karma significantly decrease perceived similarity to the victim. This difference may be driven by Americans' greater self-enhancement motives: American participants may not want to see themselves as similar to those with negative characteristics that make them susceptible to karmic punishments, in order to maintain a positive view of themselves. Self-enhancement motives tend to be weaker, or even reversed, in Asian samples (Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Kitayama et al., 1997), which may explain why Indian and Singaporean participants were not motivated to view themselves as dissimilar from the victim's of misfortune, even though they viewed the victims themselves as possessing less positive characteristics. East Asian cultural contexts have also been found

to endorse more dialectical modes of thinking and to be more willing to endorse seemingly contradictory claims, unlike American samples that strive for non-contradiction and consistency (Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2018). This tendency may help explain why positive and negative trait attributions were only negatively correlated in the American sample and were uncorrelated or positively correlated in Singapore or India. These cross-cultural differences suggest that even when ideas about supernatural forces, like karma, are shared across populations in different countries, the ways that people believe these supernatural forces operate are likely to be shaped by the unique concerns, motives, and norms of each distinct culture. Future research may reveal further ways in which karmic beliefs reflect cultural differences in psychological processes, such as the expectation that karma will be most likely to reward and punish actions that are central to interpersonal morality, or that self-serving biases appear in how believers attribute their own vs. other people's outcomes to karma, rather than external forces. Cross-cultural differences in karma may be especially evident in studies that compare more disparate cultural groups, going beyond the English-speaking, computer-using individuals who were sampled in our study.

5 | CONCLUSION

Overall, this experiment demonstrated that karma can elicit patterns of victim blaming and derogation that allow believers to maintain their expectation that the world is just, shedding further light onto the interplay between culturally supported religious concepts and the psychological motives that shape the way people help and harm one another.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Cindel J. M. White: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; funding acquisition; methodology; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Aiyana K. Willard:** Conceptualization; methodology; writing – review and editing.

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OPEN RESEARCH BADGES

This article has earned Open Data, Open Materials and Preregistered Research Design badges. Data, materials and the preregistered design and analysis plan are available at [https://osf.io/axt82/].

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Full details of the preregistration, all measures and manipulations, and the data from all studies, can be accessed at https://osf.io/axt82/.

RESEARCH MATERIALS AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All measures and manipulations and the data from all studies can be accessed at https://osf.io/axt82/.

PRE-REGISTRATION STATEMENT

Prior to conducting this study, the sampling strategy, methods and planned analyses were preregistered on the Open Science Framework https://osf.io/axt82/.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All study methods were approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia.

ORCID

Cindel J. M. White https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6050-2449

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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