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Social Work Education

The International Journal

ISSN: 0261-5479 (Print) 1470-1227 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cswe20

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To cite this article: Burak M. Gönültaş, Sena Türk, Meral Öztürk, Ahmet Türk & Furkan Ari (10 Sep 2025): The moderating role of victim-related education in social work: examining the relationship between unjust/just-world beliefs and prejudice towards crime victims, Social Work Education, DOI: 10.1080/02615479.2025.2558115

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2025.2558115

Published online: 10 Sep 2025.

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SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2025.2558115

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The moderating role of victim-related education in social work: examining the relationship between unjust/just-world beliefs and prejudice towards crime victims

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the relationship between social work students' unjust/just world beliefs and their prejudiced attitudes toward victims, as well as the moderating effect of victim-related education on this relationship. The study's sample comprised 412 social work students. Just World Belief Scale and the Perceptions of Victims Scale was used. The regression analysis, underpinned by the bootstrap technique via the Process Macro plug-in, was utilized to ascertain the moderating effect of victim-related training programmes. Results indicated that unjust world beliefs did not interact significantly with victim-related education in predicting prejudice. In contrast, victim-focused education significantly moderated the association between just world beliefs and prejudicial attitudes. Among students without such training, stronger endorsement of just world beliefs was associated with a marked increase in prejudice toward victims. However, this effect was substantially weakened among students who had received victim-related instruction. This study has produced two significant insights: First, pervasive societal judgments internalized by students can shape their attitudes toward victimized groups. Second, targeted educational interventions can attenuate the biasing influence of just world beliefs. Incorporating victimization-focused content into social work curricula is thus essential for mitigating prejudicial tendencies and fostering more equitable, empathetic professional practice.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 6 March 2025
Accepted 1 September 2025

KEYWORDS
Crime victims; just world belief; prejudice; social work education; social work

Introduction

Crime has long been a persistent social issue, and with modernization, its types and frequency have increased, resulting in more individuals experiencing physical, emotional, and economic harm worldwide, including in Turkey (Türk, 2023). According to data from the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Justice (2024), the victimization rate in 2023 was recorded at 47.9%. Given that property crimes (such as theft, property damage, and fraud) and violent crimes (such as injury) are among the

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most commonly committed offenses in Turkey, it is reasonable to infer that the majority of victims have been exposed to these categories of crime (Gürses, 2024).

The experience of victimization can lead to a range of adverse consequences and leave deep psychological, emotional, and social impacts on individuals. Emotionally, victims frequently report feelings of anger, fear, helplessness, guilt, shame, sadness, and grief (Canadian Resource Center for Victims of Crime, 2005). Beyond the direct effects of the crime itself, victims are often subjected to societal prejudice. While the intensity of prejudice may vary depending on the type of crime—such as in the case of sexual violence (Filipas & Ullman, 2001; Pickard, 2021) where victims are frequently met with particularly negative societal reactions—it is evident that victims of all crime types are vulnerable to various forms of social prejudice and stigmatization (Öztürk et al., 2025). Victims may encounter explicit or implicit messages suggesting they are responsible for what happened to them. These responses not only exacerbate the psychological consequences of victimization but also hinder victims' willingness to seek professional support, leading to increased isolation and difficulties in accessing their rights (Lea, 2007; Pickard, 2021).

Social work professionals working with victims are not immune to these societal stigmas. As members of the same society, they too may be influenced by prevailing views on justice (Aksu, 2024), perceptions of individuals involved in judicial cases (Akgün, 2019), and the broader societal judgments toward these groups (Gönültaş, 2021). Consequently, when victims are subjected to biased attitudes from social work professionals, they interact with, they may experience what is known as secondary victimization (Department of Victim Rights, 2021; Şenyuva & Türk, 2022). Given this context, it is essential to examine the factors that shape the perspectives of future professionals who will work with victimized groups. Understanding these influences is crucial for enhancing their undergraduate education and preparing them to engage with these sensitive populations in a manner that minimizes harm and promotes healing.

Just world belief

The belief in a just world is considered a psychological illusion that enables individuals to perceive their lives as more meaningful and positive (Lerner, 1978). The belief that the world is a fair place supports individuals in perceiving their physical and social environments as organized, reliable, and stable (Furnham, 2003). Hafer (2000) suggests that the just world belief serves an adaptive function by enabling individuals to make investments in their futures. People who hold this belief trust that their efforts in a just world will be rewarded fairly, allowing them to develop long-term plans. Additionally, the just world belief fosters a sense of security that individuals will be treated fairly in life (Dalbert, 2001). On the other hand, individuals may also hold a belief in an unjust World. This belief entails the conviction that one lives in a disordered and chaotic world (Lerner, 1980). In societies where justice is considered a virtue, the notion that investments will not yield fair outcomes can have detrimental effects on individuals (Collins & Strelan, 2021). The just world belief may distort reality in a way that leads to the perception that the victim bears some responsibility in cases of crime or assault, potentially resulting in a tendency to blame the victim, either partially or entirely (Maes, 1998). This perspective may shift the responsibility from the perpetrator to the victim (Sümer, 2022), and under this viewpoint, many of the approaches that victims deserve and require could be

undermined. A significant factor in the development of such views may be the societal prejudices directed toward these groups (Kuruçay, 2024; Öztürk et al., 2025).

Prejudices against victims and their potential effects

Prejudices against victims can lead to their social exclusion, create barriers to accessing essential services, and even discourage them from reporting the crimes they have experienced (Herman, 2005; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Various psychological and societal factors play a significant role in the formation of this prejudice. Over time, biased attitudes develop through cognitive processes, creating a foundation for generalized and preconceived judgments about victims. Negative perceptions of victims can lead to dismissive or degrading behaviors toward them, often without a proper understanding of their circumstances. For example, there are frequent misconceptions that victims deserve the situations they find themselves in or that they speak out only to gain personal advantage (Gönültaş, 2021; Ward, 1988). Such prejudices, particularly during interviews, can result in a skeptical approach regarding the reliability of victims' statements, which may create the impression that victims are not believed. This process can trigger a range of negative emotional responses from professionals, such as fear, contempt, pity, or frustration, which in turn may contribute to the further marginalization of victims. Ultimately, this exclusionary behavior may lead to violations of their fundamental rights (Gönültaş, 2021). Moreover, the likelihood of secondary victimization increases in such contexts. According to United Nations Centre for International Crime Prevention (1999), secondary victimization refers to the harm that victims experience due to the attitudes and behaviors of institutions and professionals working within these institutions. These forms of secondary victimization can exacerbate the trauma victims have already endured, deepening their sense of harm and reinforcing societal prejudices.

Social work education for crime victims

Social workers play a crucial role in the criminal justice system and victim support units, both in Turkey and in countries with modern judicial systems. In recent years, the number of social workers in the criminal justice system has increased rapidly. As of 2021, 400 additional professionals, including social workers, pedagogues, and psychologists, have been added to units such as juvenile courts, victim support services, probation offices, and prisons in Turkey, bringing the total number of active professionals to 1,208 (Ministry of Justice, 2021). However, since Victim Support Units are newly established, the number of specialists remains below the desired level.

Moreover, social workers are expected to possess the necessary knowledge and skills to provide services to crime victims, a group that requires specific attention (Wormer et al., 2008). While social workers in the judicial field undertake many essential roles, it is emphasized that most social work students lack adequate undergraduate training to work in courtrooms or judicial settings (Robbins et al., 2014). A study conducted by B. M. Gönültaş and Öztürk (2020) revealed that while the undergraduate course on Forensic Social Work in Turkey covers topics such as victimology, the problems faced by victims, victim rights, and approaches to victims, many social work departments still do not offer these courses. Although more

than 50 universities have active social work departments, only about 10 offer the forensic social work course. In these 14-week courses, students receive education on the fundamental principles of forensic social work, the structure and functioning of the Turkish criminal justice system, basic criminological theories, offender groups and intervention strategies, restorative justice practices, probation services, victims' rights, types of victimization, and social work interventions with crime victims. In addition to theoretical instruction, various teaching methods such as case analysis, group discussions, and role-playing are employed. These practices aim not only to provide students with theoretical knowledge but also to help them develop critical thinking and reflective professional skills. The alignment between course content and pedagogical approach is essential for equipping social work students with the professional competencies needed to engage with victims in a sensitive, informed, and rights-based manner. According to the research findings, students who have taken these courses tend to have lower levels of victim-blaming attitudes compared to those who have not received such education (Gönültaş, 2021; Kuruçay, 2024; Öztürk et al., 2025).

The present study

In the context outlined above, it is expected that social work students who will work with victimized groups in the future possess a certain understanding of justice within the framework of our current social dynamics. When this understanding is influenced by societal prejudices against victims, it may lead to harmful practices and approaches that result in secondary victimization for these groups, causing further harm and loss of rights. In one study, victims reported that the most distressing behaviors they encountered during judicial processes were the judgmental expressions and body language of the professionals conducting interviews, which led them to feel blamed for their victimization (Erez & Belknap, 1998). Moreover, empirical studies have demonstrated that individuals who receive education on victim-related issues tend to exhibit lower levels of prejudice toward victims (Gönültaş, 2020; Kuruçay, 2024; Öztürk et al., 2025). In this context, the aim of this study is to examine the relationship between social work students' belief in a just world and their prejudicial attitudes toward victims and to explore how factors such as victim-related education, courses, and participation in activities influence this relationship. This study investigated the prejudices directed toward victims of crime types that are more commonly encountered in Turkish society, specifically property crimes (e.g. Theft, property damage and fraud) and violent offenses (e.g. injury). Victims of sexual assault/abuse were deliberately excluded from the study due to the consistently high levels of societal prejudice toward this group (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010), which could potentially confound the analysis of just-world beliefs.

Thus, the research will be conducted within a model designed to investigate these dynamics, contributing to the advancement of social work education for victimized groups. This research aims to offer insights that will help inform the future development of curricula and training programs for social workers, ensuring they are well-equipped to engage with victims in a compassionate, informed, and just manner. Theoretical model is presented in Figure 1.

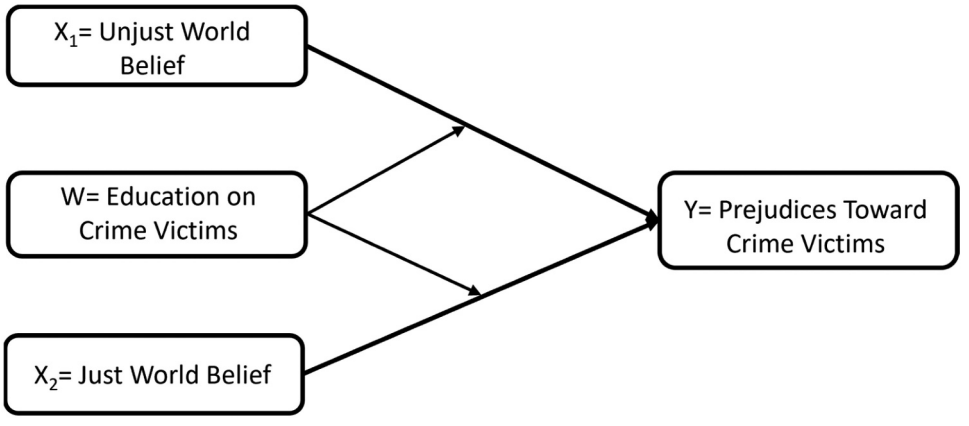


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

Population and sample

The population of this study consists of undergraduate students studying Social Work in Turkey. According to the Higher Education Institution (2024), there are a total of 3.925 full-time social work undergraduate students, of which 3.498 are enrolled in public universities and 427 in private universities. Using convenience and snowball sampling techniques, the study reached 412 social work students. Of the participants, 355 (86.2%) were female and 57 (13.8%) were male, with a mean age of $\bar{x} = 25.21 \pm 1.82$ years. Of the students, 181 (43.9%) reported that they had not received education related to victims, while 231 (56.1%) stated that they had received such education.

Data collection tools

In this study, a personal information form developed by the researchers, the 'Belief in a Just World Scale,' and the 'Attitudes toward Victims Scale' were used to gather information on the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.

Belief in a just world scale

The scale, developed by Rubin and Peplau (1975), was translated into Turkish by Yalçın (2006). It consists of 20 items, 11 positive and 9 negatives. The scale is a 6-point Likert-type, with responses ranging from '1 = Strongly Agree' to '6 = Strongly Disagree.' The scale includes two subdimensions: belief in a just world (items 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 18, and 19) and belief in an unjust world (items 1, 4, 5, 8, 10, 13, 16, 17, and 20). The just-world belief subdimension includes items such as 'Basically, the world is a just place' and 'By and large, people deserve what they get,' In contrast, the unjust-world belief sub-dimension is represented by items like 'I have found that a person rarely deserves the reputation he/she has' and 'Many people suffer through absolutely no fault of their own.' A higher average score on the scale indicates a higher belief in a just world.

The translation used in this study was directly taken from Yalçın (2006). For the validity analysis of the scale, both exploratory (EFA) and confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted. First, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's test of sphericity were applied

to check the suitability of the data for EFA. The results showed a KMO value of .78 and a Bartlett's test value of $\chi^2 = 714.601$ ($p < .01$), indicating the data was suitable for confirmatory factor analysis. During the analysis using the VARIMAX technique, items 4, 5, 8, 10, 12, 16, and 17 were removed due to factor loadings being below .40. The remaining 13 items had factor loadings ranging from .459 to .673. The first factor (belief in a just world) explained 23.83% of the variance, and the second factor (belief in an unjust world) explained 14.09%, together accounting for 37.92% of the total variance. After conducting CFA, the model showed poor fit, and modifications were made between items 2 and 18, 11 and 15, 9 and 14, and item 6. In the repeated analysis, the following fit indices were obtained: $\chi^2/df = 2.231$; $p < .000$, RMSA = .054, GFI = .958, AGFI = .934, CFI = .908, IFI = .911. These values suggest that the model provides an acceptable level of fit. In this study, the internal consistency coefficients for the subdimension of belief in a just world was $\alpha = .74$, and for the subdimension of belief in an unjust world was $\alpha = .66$.

Attitudes toward victims scale

The scale, developed by Gönültaş (2021), consists of 7 items. It is a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree … 5 = Strongly Agree), designed to measure the level of prejudice toward victims among professionals who work with or have the potential to work with victims. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements about property crimes such as theft, property damage and violent crimes such as injury. Example items from the scale include: 'If someone is a victim, they must have deserved it,' 'Victims are actually seeking personal gain by pretending to be victims,' and 'Victims are as responsible as the perpetrators for the crime.' As the score on the scale increases, the level of prejudice toward victims also increases. The internal consistency coefficient of the scale is $\alpha = .81$ in the original study, and $\alpha = .83$ in this research.

Data collection and analysis

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Sinop University Human Research Ethics Committee, with the decision dated [27 December 2024] and numbered [2024/411]. In this study, a convenience and snowball sampling method were used to reach 412 social work undergraduate students, and the data were collected using an online survey tool created through Google Forms.

For data analysis, SPSS 25.0 and AMOS software were employed. Regression analysis based on the bootstrap technique was used to detect moderation effects. The analysis was conducted via the Process Macro (Model 1) plugin. To prevent multicollinearity issues in the interaction term's effect on the dependent variable, belief in an unjust world and belief in a just world was standardized, and a bootstrap technique with 5000 resampling iterations was employed.

Results

Descriptive statistics of variables and the relationship between variables

In this study, descriptive statistics were used to examine social work students' beliefs in a just world, beliefs in an unjust world, and their level of prejudice toward victims. As

shown in Table 1, the mean score for belief in a just world was $\bar{x}$= 3.23±.74, the mean score for belief in an unjust world was $\bar{x}$ = 4.29±.84, and the mean score for prejudice toward victims was $\bar{x}$= 1.59±.56. Based on these findings, social work students exhibited a moderate level of belief in both a just and an unjust world, while their prejudice toward victims was very low.

To examine the relationships between social work students' beliefs in a just world, beliefs in an unjust world, and their prejudice toward victims, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. The findings are presented in Table 1. The analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between prejudice toward victims and belief in a just world ($r = -.350$; $p < .01$), and a significant negative correlation between prejudice toward victims and belief in an unjust world ($r = -.090$; $p < .05$). This indicates that there is a meaningful relationship between participants' belief in a just world and their prejudice toward victims, with prejudice toward victims increasing as belief in a just world rises.

The moderating effect of victim-related education on the relationship between belief in an unjust world and prejudice toward victims

As presented in Table 2, belief in an unjust world and victim-related education explained approximately 5% ($R^2 = 0.048$) of the variance in the changes in prejudice toward victims. The regression analysis indicated that belief in an unjust world did not have a significant effect on prejudice toward victims (β = −.0469; 95% CI [−.0992/.0055]; $t = -1.7594$; $p > .001$). When examining the interaction effect of belief in an unjust world and victim-related education, it was found that whether or not participants had received education on victims did not moderate the relationship (β = .0423; 95% CI [−.0101/.0947]; $t = 1.5879$; $p > .001$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables.

Variables	n	Min.	Max.	$\bar{x}$	sd.	1	2	3
1. Belief in a Just World	412	1.33	5.00	3.23	0.74	1		
2. Belief in an Unjust World	412	2.00	6.00	4.29	0.84	−.334**	1	
3. Prejudice toward Victims	412	1.00	3.86	1.59	0.56	.350**	−.090*	1

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.

Table 2. Regression analysis results on the moderator effect (X_1, W, Y).

Variables	β	*S.E*	*t*	*p*
Constant	1.5734* [1.5211/1.6257]	.0266	59.1468	.000
Belief in an Unjust World (X_1)	−.0469 [−.0992/.0051]	.0266	−1.7594	.079
Victim-Related Education (W)	−0,1014* −.1537/-.0490	.0266	−3.8055	.000
Belief in an Unjust World × Victim-Related Education ($X_1 \times W$)	.0423 −.0101/.0947	.0266	1.5879	.113

$R = .219$; $R^2 = .048$; *$p < .001$; S.E. = Standard Error; β = Unstandardized Beta Coefficient.

The moderating effect of victim-related education on the relationship between belief in a just world and prejudice toward victims

The regression analysis revealed that the predictor variables explained approximately 18% ($R^2 = .184$) of the variance in the dependent variable, with belief in a just world significantly affecting prejudice toward victims. A one-unit increase in belief in a just world resulted in a .19 increase in prejudice toward victims (β = .1900; 95% CI [.1414/.2387]; $t = 7.6816$; $p < .001$). When examining the interaction effect of the predictor variables, it was found that victim-related education had a moderating effect. The beta coefficient for the interaction between belief in a just world and victim-related education was significant (β = −.1040; 95% CI [−.1529/-.0552]; $t = -4.1831$; $p < .001$). The findings illustrated in Table 3.

To understand how this effect varies across groups, slope analysis was conducted. The effect of belief in a just world on prejudice toward victims was found to be significant both among those who had not received victim-related education (β = .3074; 95% CI [.2326/.3822]; $t = 8.0784$; $p < .001$) and among those who had received such education (β = .0980; 95% CI [.0341/.1620]; $t = 3.0146$; $p < .001$). Table 4 illustrated situational effects based on different values of the moderator effect.

According to the slope graph created to assess the moderating effect of receiving victim-related education, as the belief in a just world increases for both those who have received education and those who have not, their levels of prejudice toward victims also rise. However, this increase is more pronounced among those who have not received victim-related education compared to those who have. Figure 2 explains slope graph for the moderator variable.

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between social work students' beliefs in a just or unjust world and their prejudicial attitudes toward victims, as well as the moderating role of victim-related education in this dynamic. The findings revealed that just world beliefs were strongly associated with increased prejudice among students who lacked victim-

Table 3. Regression analysis results on the moderator effect (X_2, W, Y).

Variables	β	*S.E.*	*t*	*p*
Constant	1.5670* [1.5184/1.6155]	.0247	63.4579	.000
Just World Belief (X_2)	.1900* [.1414/.2387]	.0247	7.6816	.000
Victim-Related Education (W)	−.0872* −.1358/-.0385	.0247	−3.5244	.000
Just World Belief× Victim-Related Education ($X_2 \times W$)	−.1040* −.1529/-.0552	.0249	−4.1831	.000

$R = .429$; $R^2 = .184$; *$p < .001$; S.E. = Standard Error; β = Unstandardized Beta Coefficient.

Table 4. Situational effects based on different values of the moderator effect.

VRE	n	β	*S.E.*	*t*	*p*	%95 CI
No	181	.3074	.0381	8.0784	.000*	.2326/.3822
Yes	231	.0980	.0325	3.0146	.000*	.0341/.1620

*$p < .001$; S.H = Standard Error; CI = Confidence Interval; VRE = Victim related education.

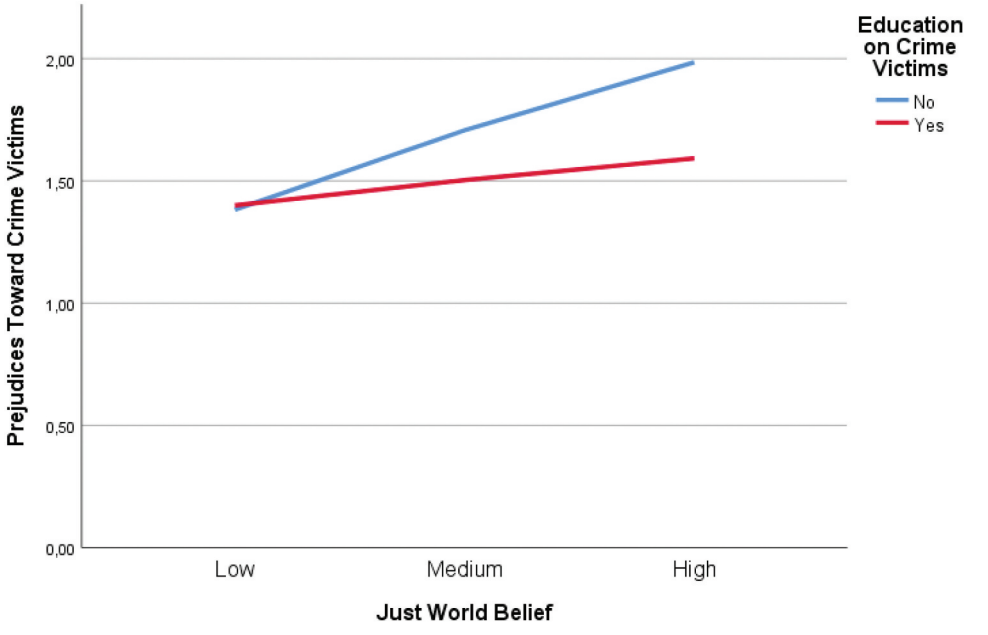


Figure 2. Slope graph for the moderator variable.

related training. Notably, this relationship was significantly attenuated among those who had received such instruction. However, unjust world beliefs did not significantly predict prejudice in the context of educational exposure.

According to the findings among students who have not received education related to victims, an increase in belief in a just world is observed to lead to an increase in prejudice toward victims. For students without victim-related education, when belief in a just world is low, the level of prejudice is approximately 1.4; however, as the belief in a just world increases, prejudice also rises, reaching around 2.0 at high levels of just-world belief. Similarly, among students who have received education related to victims, prejudice increases with stronger belief in a just world, but this increase is more limited compared to those without such education. Specifically, the prejudice level among educated students is about 1.4 when just-world belief is low and remains around 1.6 even at high levels of just-world belief. The literature suggests that participation in courses, seminars, or workshops related to victims reduces levels of prejudice toward these groups (Gönültaş, 2020; Kuruçay, 2024; Öztürk et al., 2025). Arslan (2023) found that social workers who directly engage with victims exhibit lower levels of prejudice. However, according to this present study, even though undergraduate students do not have direct contact with victims, receiving education focused on victims can still effectively reduce their prejudices. The finding demonstrates that while belief in a just world is a cognitive distortion that leads to victim blaming, this distortion can be disrupted through education. Depending on the content of the education received, individuals' knowledge and awareness of the complexity of victimization and the influence of external factors on victimization increase. This facilitates a more realistic framework of justice and simultaneously reduces prejudice toward victims, fostering more understanding and

supportive attitudes. Education may reshape justice perceptions on the basis of individual rights by challenging the assumption that victims are at fault. Additionally, education may have weakened the triggering effect of just world beliefs on prejudice by encouraging students to explain victimization in terms of systemic factors (such as poverty and cycles of violence) rather than individual faults. Based on the findings, it can be inferred that belief in a just world may increase social work students' tendency to avoid working with victims. Therefore, receiving education focused on victims could enhance these students' motivation to work in critical areas such as 'victim support units,' which are rapidly growing in importance due to the increasing number of victims in our country.

Another notable finding was the absence of a significant moderating effect of forensic social work education on the relationship between unjust-world beliefs and prejudice toward victims. This finding suggests that the current social work curriculum is insufficient in challenging and transforming individuals' stereotypical beliefs stemming from unjust-world ideologies, particularly in relation to prejudice toward victims. The persistence of this belief-prejudice link even among those who have received forensic social work education indicates that the curriculum may fall short in fostering critical thinking and encouraging students to question deeply rooted assumptions (Thompson et al., 2024). Commonly observed among students who perceive the world as inherently unjust and believe that individual efforts are incapable of overcoming systemic inequalities. The curriculum may lack targeted interventions aimed at challenging and reshaping these deeply rooted cognitive schemas. Additionally, current educational content may not critically engage with dominant societal narratives that differentiate between 'innocent' and 'culpable' victims. Therefore, we recommend that traditional classroom instruction be more extensively supplemented with experiential learning methods, particularly for this subgroup of students. Specifically, the more frequent integration of forensic interview simulations into course content could provide students with tangible experiences of change, thereby contributing to the restructuring of pessimistic cognitive frameworks. Alternatively, measurement limitations (unjust-world belief $\alpha = .66$) may have attenuated effects; future research should validate findings using qualitative designs.

In summary, we attribute the moderating effect of victim education on prejudice observed in the group with a strong belief in a just world, and the absence of such effect in the other group, to the interaction between education and preexisting cognitive frameworks. Specifically, education more effectively challenges and reshapes the rigid biases related to justice and victim blaming held by those with strong just world beliefs, whereas individuals with unjust world belief already hold less prejudiced attitudes, leaving less room for education to create a measurable difference in this group.

Strength and limitations

This study makes several notable contributions to the social work literature. First, it extends prior research (Öztürk et al., 2025) by demonstrating that undergraduate education can attenuate justworld—driven prejudice before students enter professional practice—a finding unique to Türkiye's social work context. Second, by operationally restricting the concept of 'victim' to prevalent intentional crimes (e.g. theft, fraud), we controlled for extreme stigma effects (such as rape myths) and aligned our measures with the realities faced by Turkish social workers. Finally, whereas most existing studies of

victim prejudice have focused on demographic attributes (e.g. race, gender), our work is among the first to examine professional prejudice through the lens of justworld beliefs.

This study has several important limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the gender distribution of the sample was heavily skewed toward females (86%), which, although reflective of the actual demographics of social work departments, may limit the generalizability of the results. Second, participants were asked to evaluate adult victims of common crimes—specifically property crimes (e.g. theft, burglary) and violent crimes (e.g. physical injury). To isolate the effect of just-world beliefs on victim-blaming, we deliberately excluded more complex crime—victimization dynamics (e.g. domestic violence cycles, gang-related violence, or sexual assault) and focused on 'unambiguously non-responsible victims.' As victim-blaming tendencies vary depending on crime type and victim characteristics, the findings should not be generalized to all forms of victimization. Future research should investigate how just-world beliefs operate in more ambiguous contexts, where victim and perpetrator roles may overlap, and whether similar patterns are observed across different victim profiles. Moreover, subsequent studies could examine how victim-related education affects students' motivation to work in victim support roles and explore additional moderating variables—such as locus of control, empathy, or moral disengagement—that may influence attitudes toward victims in interaction with just-world beliefs

Implications

This study has two significant implications for the development of social work education:

(a) ***Development of Prejudices Towards Vulnerable Groups:*** It is evident that future social workers may develop negative attitudes toward vulnerable and atrisk populations due to pervasive societal perceptions and misconceptions. Such tendencies increase their prejudice toward victims. This finding underscores a critical imperative for social work education: the need to identify and critically examine the 'social and human perspectives' that are shaped and reinforced by culture and environment over time. If left unchallenged, these perspectives may become normalized and shape students' approaches to vulnerable groups in potentially harmful ways. Therefore, social work education programs should include targeted interventions that actively challenge and transform these ingrained biases. In this context, our findings can guide the design of educational interventions that account for how societal prejudices influence students' worldviews, ultimately fostering more objective and humane practitioner—client relationships in their postgraduation professional practice.

(b) ***Reducing Prejudices Before Entering the Profession:*** Despite the increasing importance of social workers' roles within the criminal justice system and the growing need for qualified personnel in the Ministry of Justice's victim support units, these findings highlight the necessity of revisiting and updating the undergraduate social work curriculum. Incorporating courses such as victimology, secondary victimization, prevention strategies, and victimcentered approaches into the curriculum—and promoting participation in victimology conferences, seminars, and related events—will better equip future practitioners for this field.

Such early exposure is effective in reducing students' societal biases toward victims and enabling them to make informed decisions about their areas of specialization before beginning professional practice. However, it is equally important to integrate critical perspectives that address the potential misuse or co-optation of 'victim discourse' to justify punitive and tough-on-crime policies into the curriculum. For instance, while victims' rights movements in the United States have amplified survivors' voices, they have at times facilitated mass incarceration and the expansion of the prisonindustrial complex (Gottschalk, 2006; Simon, 2007). Incorporating such critical analyses alongside restorative justice principles offers a balanced approach, ensuring that practitioners support victims effectively without reinforcing oppressive systems. To prevent such unintended consequences, social work curricula should integrate critical analyses of victim advocacy alongside restorative justice principles (Thompson et al., 2024). This balanced approach ensures that practitioners support victims effectively without reinforcing oppressive systems.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Ethical approval and informed consent

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, revised in 2000. Before the study was conducted ethical committee approval was obtained from Sinop University, Human Research Ethics Committee (27 December 2024–2024/411). With online survey form which was constituted utilizing 'Google Forms,' measuring tools of the study were delivered to the participants via social media platforms. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study.

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