In this study, the author hypothesized that a high belief in a just world for Self (BJW-S), coupled with high perceived self-efficacy, would contribute to preservation of self-esteem in threatening social comparison. Participants (N=186) completed the General Self-Efficacy Scale (Walliser, Schwartz, & Jerusalem, 1993) and the BJW-S and BJW for Others (BJW-O) scales (Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996). They were then given either an upward (unfavorable) or downward (favorable) social comparison in the academic field. The results suggested that BJW-S (but not BJW-O) coupled with high self-efficacy contributed to maintaining self-esteem in the face of an unfavorable social comparison. However, in cases of low perceived self-efficacy, BJW-S acted in the opposite direction: when BJW-S was low, self-esteem was not affected by unfavorable social comparisons, while it decreased when BJW-S was high.

The belief in a just world (BJW), according to which people generally get what they deserve (Lerner, 1980), constitutes a fundamental attitudinal orientation widely involved in the perception and comprehension of individuals’ physical and social environment. According to Lerner (1980, p.125), the relevance of BJW is not limited to the judgment of others, even if his theory is mostly known from this aspect. As the perspective of the target is invested with increasing importance in social psychology (see Swim & Stangor, 1998), the Just World hypothesis is examined more and more frequently from the point of view of the individual. It has been demonstrated that BJW is indisputably related to psychological benefits. Many studies have underlined that just world believers
react more favorably to various threatening situations (see Dalbert, 2001, for review).

It may be assumed that the more relevant dimension in matters referring to psychosocial adjustment is the belief in a just world for the Self rather than for Others, the former being implicitly taken into account by subjects when they respond to a general scale. In a study by Lipkus, Dalbert, and Siegler (1996), only BJW for Self coherently predicted less depression, less stress, and higher life satisfaction. Furthermore, it has been shown that BJW for Self is more coherently correlated than is BJW for Others with the five main personality dimensions (Costa & Mc Crae, 1989): just world believers see themselves as less neurotic, more emotionally stable, extraverted, and open. A study by Bègue and Bastounis (2003) also showed that BJW for self (and not BJW for others) was significantly correlated with feeling that life was purposeful.

The literature cited above lends support to the idea that individuals who believe that what happens to them and to others is in line with their own actions or character have at their disposal an important regulator involved in the daily management of potentially threatening or destabilizing situations. Tomaka and Blascovitch (1994) have described the moderating role that BJW has on stress in a potentially stressing situation. Strong just world believers manifested lower stress (measured by psychological and physiological indicators) after performing two quick tasks of subtraction and committed fewer errors during the task than did low just world believers. Based on these results which underline the stress-buffering effect of BJW, the following study tested the hypothesis that students’ BJW-S would contribute to a positive perception of a potentially stressing situation. The procedure employed to induce stress was inspired by work on social comparison (Festinger, 1954). Subjects had to compare themselves to targets presented as benefiting from more or less enviable attributes than themselves. The effects of such comparison on self-esteem have been well established in prior research: ascending or upward social comparison (comparing oneself to someone superior) induces a decrease in self-attributed value. On the contrary, self-attributed value is reinforced through descending or downward social comparison (Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wills, 1981).

The interaction between BJW-S and direction of social comparison was not expected to be simple. Unlike the procedure used by Tomaka and Blascovitch (1994), in the present study the information which induced threat was directly provided to the subjects and did not result from their own task performance. In order to investigate how individuals make sense of failure as a function of their BJW, an additional personality variable was taken into account in the present study, that is, perceived self-efficacy. This construct refers to the feeling of being competent and efficient, and is significantly operative in situations where the individual is faced with a difficult task or situation. People with feelings of high
self-efficacy are less anxious during a difficult task (Bandura, Cioffi, Taylor, Gauthier, & Gossard, 1987) and are more persevering (Cervone & Peake, 1986; Eden & Aviram, 1993). In a field study, Mittag and Schwartzer (1993) suggested that perceived self-efficacy affects the emotions and behaviors of people who have lost their jobs.

We hypothesized that high just-world believers would react differently to self-esteem threat depending on their level of self-efficacy. Our rationale is that when confronted by adversity, believing in a just world does not necessarily induce an adaptative reaction, that is, does not necessarily work as a buffer against stress. If someone who believes in a just world feels resourceless when faced with stressful life events, his/her reaction might be a depressive one, because just-world beliefs induce internal attributions (Hafer & Correy, 1999). On the contrary, when a just-world believer copes with a threat but has a general feeling of efficiency, those beliefs may represent an efficient buffer against stress. It was therefore hypothesized that self-efficacy and BJW for self (but not BJW for others, which was not relevant in that situation) would contribute to protect self-esteem in threatening situations, that is, situations of upward social comparison. It was expected that self-efficacy would modulate the effects of BJW-S and type of social comparison on self-esteem. More specifically, subjects with high self-efficacy and high BJW-S scores were expected to feel less – if at all – threatened in a situation of upward social comparison than did others, and therefore, it was expected that their self-esteem would not be affected. On the contrary, in a situation of upward social comparison, self-esteem would decrease for subjects with high self-efficacy but low BJW-S scores. Theoretically, the predictions about the effects of BJW-S on the perception of an unfavorable social comparison in cases of low self-efficacy were less clear. We considered that subjects with low self-efficacy were expected to react less favorably in such a situation, independently of their BJW-S, which would then induce either a decrease in – or maintenance of – their self-esteem. In this study, we also aimed at confirming the previous distinction between BJW for self and BJW for others (Lipkus et al., 1996). We expected a buffering effect only with BJW-S, not with BJW-O.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

One hundred and eighty-six Psychology students (23 men, 162 women and 1 missing answer) from the University of Grenoble participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 19 to 45 years, with a mean age of 22 years ($SD = 3.64$).
MEASURES AND PROCEDURE
Participants were presented with a booklet including the General Self-Efficacy Scale (Walliser, Schwartzer, & Jerusalem, 1993) and BJW-S and BJW-O scales (Lipkus et al., 1996; French version by Bègue & Bastounis, 2003). Reliability analysis indicated that Cronbach’s alphas were .83, .83 and .81 respectively. The booklet was distributed to participants in groups. As participants finished completing the first part of the assessment and handed back their completed booklets, a second was distributed, a printed document presenting a text, identified as an excerpt from a well-known and prestigious French journal in the field of education. The text was introduced with the following instructions: “Here is an excerpt taken from Le Monde de l’Education (June 2000, author, J. M. Mayeur) concerning Psychology university studies. Please read the text carefully and then answer a few questions about it”. After filling in this booklet subjects were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

As the dependent measure, we relied on the French version of the self-esteem scale developed by Rosenberg (1965), validated in the French context by Vallières and Vallerand (1990). It is composed of 10 Likert-type items rated on a 6-point scale (Cronbach’s alpha = 82).

EXPERIMENTAL MANIPULATION
Two types of texts were distributed in random order, inducing either an upward (unfavorable) or downward (favorable) situation of social comparison. In the former, the text read: “This year again, the number of students in Psychology will increase. In reference to other students in the so-called ‘hard’ sciences and in the social sciences, Psychology students have reason to worry: the current economic upswing should hinder the recognition of their qualifications and multiply the obstacles toward finding a job that is worthwhile”. In the downward comparison experimental condition the following text was presented: “This year again, the number of students in Psychology will increase. In reference to other students in the so-called ‘hard’ sciences and in the social sciences, psychology students have reason to rejoice: the current economic upswing should promote the recognition of their qualifications and facilitate their finding a job at an enviable level”.

RESULTS
Several subjects did not fill in all questions, which explains variations in degrees of freedom. No significant differences were observed between genders for any scales. Following the types of analyses reported by Tomaka and Blascovich (1994), a median-split was calculated for the BJW-S and the self-efficacy scores. A 2 (BJW-Self; high or low) x 2 (Self-efficacy; high or low) x 2 (type of comparison; downward or upward) ANOVA was conducted on the
dependent measure (see Table 1 for a summary of the cell means for each variable). A significant main effect of self-efficacy was observed, indicating that a higher self-efficacy was associated with a higher self-esteem, $F(1,171) = 21.12$, $p < .001$. No two-way interactions were observed. In accordance with the prediction, a three-way interaction was found between BJW-S, self-efficacy and social comparison, $F(1,178) = 4.36$, $p < .038$. One-tailed planned contrasts showed that the self-esteem of high just world believers with high self-efficacy was not modified by direction of social comparison, $t(48) = 0.38$, $ns$, while it decreased significantly for subjects with low self-efficacy scores, $t(39) = 1.73$, $p < .05$. Moreover, when we compared the self-esteem of subjects with high just-world beliefs with the self-esteem of subjects with low just-world beliefs within the upward condition, the difference was marginally significant ($t(172) = -1.56$, $p < .06$.

Among low self-efficacy subjects, self-esteem for subjects with low BJW-S was not influenced by direction of social comparison, $t(58)= -0.18$, $ns$, while high BJW-S subjects expressed significantly lower self-esteem in a situation of unfavorable social comparison, $t(30) = 2.06$, $p < .04$.

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Means and Standard Deviations of Self-Esteem by Direction of Social Comparison</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Self-Efficacy</td>
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<td>BJW - Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Downward comparison</td>
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<tr>
<td>Upward comparison</td>
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In order to confirm the relevance of the distinction between BJW for Self and BJW for Others (Lipkus et al., 1996), similar analyses were conducted with the BJW-O scale. Scores were split around the median and a 2 (BJW-Others; high or low) x 2 (Self-efficacy; high or low) x 2 (type of comparison; downward or upward) analysis of variance was computed. As expected, this analysis yielded no significant main effects or interactions.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of the study suggest that belief in a just world for the Self modulates significantly the way that people face negative events and illustrates that BJW-S buffers the threatening perception of potentially destabilizing conditions. BJW-S coupled with high perceived self-efficacy contributed to maintaining self-esteem in the face of a situation of unfavorable social comparison. However, in cases of low perceived self-efficacy, BJW-S acted in the opposite direction: when BJW-S
was low, self-esteem was not affected by unfavorable social comparisons, while it decreased when BJW-S was high. This result suggests that when someone is confronted by an adverse situation, believing in a just world may appear dysfunctional: if the individual feels powerless, we believe that just-world beliefs may induce an internal attribution and feelings of self-derogation.

It is possible that the inconsistency between findings that showed BJW either to support coping strategies in the face of negative events (e.g., Bulman & Wortman, 1977), or to promote victims’ additional self-derogation (see e.g., the case of patients with severe burns observed by Kiecolt-Glaser and Williams, 1987, or recent victims of job loss studied by Benson & Ritter, 1990), may be explained by self-efficacy variations in the selected samples. One of the main goals of this research was to demonstrate that BJW-S contributes to individual well-being and acts as a significant stress regulator. The results confirm the stress-buffering role of BJW-S in association with self-efficacy, where BJW-S contributes to the preservation of self-esteem in a situation of unfavorable social comparison, which generally generates effects that are threatening to the individual. We have observed that BJW-S alone was not able to explain the variations of self-esteem among the subjects submitted to a threatening situation. These results could throw light on some inconsistent previous observations. For instance, Lerner and Somers (1992) noted that BJW had a positive effect on the job-searching behavior of foundry workers anticipating the closure of their plant, but that six weeks later, the effect disappeared for more qualified workers and became clearly dysfunctional for those who were less qualified. A somewhat similar effect was obtained by Dzuka and Dalbert (2002) in their Study 1. These authors observed that positive correlations between personal BJW and different mental-health dimensions were consistently noted among students and the short-term unemployed, but personal BJW did not work as a buffer for long-term unemployed adolescents. We may, in fact, conjecture that a possible weakening of self-efficacy, which is supposed to be induced by prolonged unemployment (Eden & Aviram, 1993), could be invoked to understand the differential effect of BJW on psychological adjustment.

REFERENCES


