

# Is the world an exciting or a terrifying place? Your answer shapes your life

By Emily Esfahani Smith, Washington Post on 10.23.19

Word Count **1,198**

Level **MAX**



New research, published in the academic journal *Psychological Assessment*, reveals that the story we tell ourselves about the world can shape us in profound ways. Photo by: Dominika Roseclay/Pexels

Psychologists have spent decades studying how our core beliefs shape how we feel and what we do: If you believe your future is bleak, you're more likely to be depressed; if you have a "growth mindset" — you think people can change — you're more likely to put effort into what you do and grow. But the empirical research focuses on our beliefs about ourselves and our future. Psychologists haven't looked closely at the beliefs we have about the world we live in — like whether it's a good place, or a meaningless one — and how those beliefs affect our well-being.

That's changing. New research, published in the academic journal *Psychological Assessment*, reveals that the story we tell ourselves about the world can shape us in profound ways. The researchers, led by Jeremy Clifton of the University of Pennsylvania, found that our "primal world beliefs," as they call them, or "primals" for short, predict how happy or depressed we are, how trusting we are in relationships, and the decisions we make, including who we voted for in the last election.

"We psychologists have never seriously considered the possibility that a great deal of what we do and feel in life is a reaction to beliefs about the world we didn't know we have," Clifton said.

Though some psychologists have in the past identified a few world beliefs that influence people, Clifton's work represents the first attempt to catalog every major primal world belief that people might hold. Over the past five years, he and his team analyzed over 80,000 tweets, combed through the literary, religious and historical texts of cultures around the world, studied the influential movies and speeches of the last 100 years, and surveyed hundreds of people to determine what sort of world we think this is.

After sifting through the data, they discovered some patterns. There are 26 primal world beliefs people can hold, they found. They include the beliefs that the world is good, safe, changing, worth exploring and intentional.

These beliefs vary from person to person, are automatic and deep-seated, and, like our personality traits, are stable over time. They also cluster together: If you think the world is unjust, you're more likely to also believe it's unstable and threatening, whereas if you see the world as beautiful, you're likely to believe it's a meaningful and even funny place.

What most surprised the researchers, though, was that these beliefs could powerfully predict our joys and sorrows. People who believe the world is safe, enticing and alive, for example, are more likely to show gratitude to others, to be more trusting, to have a growth mind-set and to be happier. People who see the world as alive are more likely to be spiritual and find meaning in their lives. Those who are depressed think the world is unsafe — which makes sense. If the world is dangerous, that means there are threats lurking everywhere. A colleague's aloof glance is a sign that he hates you, and not that he was admiring your tie.

Interestingly, our experiences play less of a straightforward role than one might think in shaping these beliefs. "We are still studying this, but it looks like subjects who grow up rich are no more likely to see the world as an abundant place full of opportunity and resources as those who grow up poor," Clifton said, and "women — whom I would argue are objectively less safe than men and on average experience more trauma — see the world as just as safe as men."

It may be that individuals adopt their primals early on, shaped by a combination of genetics and early environmental factors that we have yet to understand. Clifton hopes that future research will shed more light on how primals originate.

By far the most important primal to emerge from the research, Clifton said, is the overall belief that the world is a good place. More than any other, this belief was associated with all kinds of positive outcomes, like having more friends and deeper relationships, having more meaning in life and higher overall well-being, being less depressed and stressed and being more optimistic.

This suggests, Clifton explained, that if your default assumption is that the world is a bad place, and that story is holding you back, it could be more helpful to change your story of the world before trying to make yourself happier in more immediate ways, like by switching jobs or rushing into a new relationship. One way to do that might be by focusing on the good things that happen each day which, other research shows, can make people happier and more optimistic.

Even though our primals are deeply embedded and stable, Clifton believes they can probably change. He mentioned cognitive behavioral therapy, an effective treatment against depression and

other disorders, in which therapists help people change their damaging beliefs about themselves. "For example," Clifton said, "a therapist can help you change the belief that you are worthless, so why would the belief that the world is worthless be that different?"

Our primal world beliefs also predict our politics.

"Liberals tend to think that conservatives see the world as a scary and dangerous place, and that drives a fear of outgroups," Clifton said. But the research told a different story. Republicans and Democrats are equal in their belief that the world is safe, but Republican voters believe the world is a just place, that it is hierarchical and that it is getting worse, according to Clifton. This can lead to resistance to change because they believe change could worsen it further, the study said. Liberals tend to think that the world is non-hierarchical and unjust, but that it is getting better, and therefore welcome change, according to Clifton.

This research, in other words, not only helps us understand ourselves more deeply, but also others — a great value during this particularly partisan and contentious time in our history.

If you are having a conflict with someone, whether it's over politics or chores, the tension could be emerging from two very different stories you each are telling about the world. If you think that the world is worth exploring, but your spouse doesn't, then that may explain why you're constantly fighting about whether to go out on a Friday night. If you think the world is unjust, you might be quick to resent your roommate for not doing his fair share of the chores. If he thinks the world is acceptable, he may not feel compelled to clean up after himself in any case. We each see the world in very different ways and that can cause collision, confusion and miscommunication.

To ease those strains, he recommends that people figure out their primals and the primals of loved ones — which they can do by taking a free scientifically validated Primals Inventory.

"The main takeaway for now," Clifton said, is that primals are "a path to empathy."

Though our beliefs live in our minds and we aren't always aware of them, they shape our reality in dramatic ways. As Shakespeare wrote, the world "is neither good nor bad, but thinking makes it so."