

New study shows a positive worldview is less associated with privilege than expected

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One might think that people living in more violent neighborhoods see the world as less safe, or that those whose socioeconomic status improved see the world as getting better, or that chronic pain patients view the

world as significantly less pleasurable.

But a new study from [The Primals Project](#) at Penn's Positive Psychology Center found that certain indicators of privilege—socioeconomic status, neighborhood safety, health, and gender—are much less associated with positive world views than both researchers and laypeople expect.

The paper, [published in the *Journal of Personality*](#), finds that researchers predicted an association that was 10 times greater on average than what surveys showed.

Primals are primal world beliefs, such as whether people see the world as progressing or declining, harmless or threatening, interesting or boring. The paper found positive primals "were poor indicators of a privileged background."

"A lot of people would expect that people's beliefs about how the world is around them are largely a reflection of what things they've experienced," says postdoctoral fellow Nicholas Kerry, lead author on the paper, but that is not the case. Kerry works with Jer Clifton, director of The Primals Project, another author on the paper.

The authors suggest that "learning that negative worldviews are not an inescapable destiny for people who have endured hardship could potentially be useful for increasing the efficacy of some types of therapy."

Clifton says of past findings on the impacts of primal world beliefs, "People who see the world as just tend to work harder, presumably because they expect good things to come from it. They tend to act nicer. They tend to be more successful, partly because they work harder and were nicer, and partly because seeing the world as just is a good ad hoc justification of the success you have. They also tend to blame victims."

In 2013, Clifton put together an advisory team to identify all major primals, working with 70 researchers for five years. They [identified](#) 26 stable but hidden primal world beliefs—which mostly fall into the categories of safe versus dangerous, enticing versus dull, and alive versus mechanistic—and developed a 99-question survey. They [published these findings in 2019](#) in the journal *Psychological Assessment*.

"I'm one of the world's experts in this niche domain, and I can be so wrong about where these beliefs come from," Clifton says. For instance, he thought his mother would see the world as a safe place and was completely wrong. He says, "If I'm wrong about my own mother, I kind of feel like all y'all don't stand a chance. Don't assume you know the primals of anyone."

The survey at myprimals.com, Clifton says, is designed to help people become more aware of their beliefs and provides anonymous data to The Primals Project.

"I tend to think of these beliefs as lenses and not mirrors. If they were mirrors that reflected our backgrounds, then we should've found much bigger correlational relationships," Clifton says. "Lenses are not impacted by the light that passes through it. We seem to use these lenses to filter events in our lives."

What surveys say

The results in the new paper came from three studies: one surveying people about their primal world beliefs, one asking for predictions on other's primals, and one focused on people who had experienced certain adverse life events.

In one study, researchers surveyed 14,481 people—paid participants, voluntary participants interested in psychology, and undergraduate

students—on how much they agreed with statements such as "Life overflows with opportunity and abundance" and "It feels like the world is going downhill."

As part of another study, the researchers asked 494 laypeople and 486 psychology researchers how they thought people would answer, based on categories such as [socioeconomic status](#) or neighborhood safety. But for all 12 hypotheses tested, the median researcher-predicted effect was greater than the actual relationship from surveys. There was a modest relationship between people who experienced childhood trauma and seeing the world as less safe, but still less than researchers predicted.

One of the 12 effects even went in the opposite direction of predictions; Clifton says he was shocked to see that female respondents were slightly more likely to view the world as safe.

Another result ran counter to expectations. Patients with [cystic fibrosis](#) were slightly more likely than those in a control group to believe the world is a good place. This finding came from the third study, in which researchers surveyed 434 cancer patients and survivors, 117 people with a history of cystic fibrosis, and 44 volunteers who had caused an accident resulting in death or serious injury to another person, along with 501 healthy volunteers as a control group. The study found only modest differences in beliefs from controls.

It did find that people who caused an accident viewed the world as substantially worse, less safe, and less just than controls. The authors noted this was not a random sample because all these people had sought a support group.

The study says the combination of this finding and the relationship between [childhood trauma](#) and safe world view suggests "there may be something qualitatively different about the experience of trauma

compared to other indicators of underprivileged life circumstances measured in this study."

But if certain indicators of privilege overall are not associated with a positive worldview, what is? That is a topic for future research. Kerry says he and Clifton have been corresponding with research teams at universities, continuing that exploration. One team is looking at the extent to which there might be a [genetic component](#) and there are dozens of other independent research efforts studying the origin and impacts of primals.

More information: Nicholas Kerry et al, Despite popular intuition, positive world beliefs poorly reflect several objective indicators of privilege, including wealth, health, sex, and neighborhood safety, *Journal of Personality* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/jopy.12877](https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12877)

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