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Happy in a crummy world: Implications of primal world beliefs for increasing wellbeing through positive psychology interventions

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ABSTRACT

Primal world beliefs: are a recently-identified set of basic perceptions about the general character of reality (e.g. *the world is boring*) thought to have many psychological implications. This article explores implications relevant to wellbeing and positive intervention research. After summarizing the supposed general function of primal world beliefs, I specify ten hypotheses concerning gratitude, curiosity, optimism, trust, self-efficacy, positive emotions, engagement, meaning, life satisfaction, and overall wellbeing. Each variable may involve behavioral patterns that present as trait-like personality characteristics while actually being context-specific reactions to underlying (and malleable) perceptions. Experimental research could test these hypotheses by (a) examining whether primal world beliefs partially mediate the wellbeing impact of established interventions such as Three Good Things and (b) creating novel interventions specifically targeting primal world beliefs. To foster the latter, I discuss elements that novel interventions might incorporate, illustrating with an example called the *Leaf Exercise*.

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*Being happy in this sh**hole of a world we live in is f**king impossible.*

– Anonymized blogger, 2019

Clifton et al. (2019) recently introduced a set of variables with theoretical implications for several disciplines but did not unpack those implications. This paper aims to correct that for those who study positive psychology interventions (PPIs). After discussing the general theoretical significance of these new variables, I will illustrate their relevance to wellbeing via ten specific hypotheses, ending with a discussion of how hypotheses might be tested.

The general theoretical significance of primal world beliefs

Whether a beautiful vacation spot or dangerous warzone, humans are responsive to beliefs about the general character of the circumstance they are in. For example, perceiving one's surroundings as crummy should impact wellbeing directly by, say, decreasing positive emotions, and indirectly by inducing behaviors known to lower wellbeing, such as neuroticism. High reactivity to such perceptions are typically adaptive, helping organisms capitalize on opportunities and compensate for threats. For example, an organism's perception of a barren environment is thought to play a determinative role in deciding when to move on from a food patch (Charnov, 1976). Yet, psychologists have never seriously considered the vast ramifications if humans had different beliefs not only about places *within* the world but also the global character of the whole world as one giant place.

As Clifton and Kim (2020) note, when an organism's behavior is observed in a single context, like a dog in a dog park, it is difficult to judge the extent to which the behavior is context-specific (i.e. a state-like reaction to that park) or organism-specific (i.e. a trait-like expression of that dog). Likewise, if an organism has beliefs about a place the organism never leaves, then these beliefs would drive many patterns of behavior that would manifest as seemingly trait-like personality characteristics while actually being context-specific reactions to an underlying perception. Moreover, if this place was populated by other organisms who also never left yet viewed the shared circumstance differently, all would likely misinterpret the behavior of others – and themselves – as stemming from differences in character rather than mere differences of opinion. In other words, these creatures would commit the fundamental attribution error on a massive scale.

To explore the possibility that this scenario describes the human condition, Clifton and colleagues (2019) (Clifton, 2020) conducted the first broad-based effort to empirically derive all major fundamental

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beliefs about the world as a whole, which we called *primals* or *primal world beliefs*, and validated a Primals Inventory to measure them. We discovered that individuals indeed disagree about this world we share, and do so along 26 normally distributed dimensions. Most variance was explained by three main primals – the beliefs that the world is *Safe, Enticing*, and *Alive* – which in turn contribute to an overall belief that the world is *Good* – the general factor. Test-retests across 2 weeks, 9 months, and 19 months suggested primals are among the most stable traits psychologists measure outside IQ. Finally, primals were largely orthogonal to demographic variables yet highly correlated with numerous personality and wellbeing variables in a pattern remarkably consistent with the strong hypothesis that most major personality 'traits' are driven in large part by normative, common-sense reactions to underlying primals. A weaker hypothesis is also possible: primals could be unique, predictive, and interesting cognitions but typically of marginal causal importance. Either way, further research is warranted and we (Clifton et al., 2019) highlighted questions in several fields, including positive psychology.

Ten hypotheses relevant to positive psychology

This section provides ten illustrative hypotheses specifying how primals may influence five wellbeing outcomes and five personality characteristics known to influence wellbeing. As an empirical plausibility check, hypotheses are accompanied by pairwise correlations and the page where it can be found in Clifton and colleagues' (2019) supplement. Most of these effects are large and nominally affected when partialing demographic variables, including socio-economic status. All reported effects are significant (p <.0001) and relationships are replicating (Clifton, 2020). Unless otherwise indicated, the relevant sample is 524 Americans averaging 37 years old, half female, and half college-graduates.

Personality variables (character strengths)

Gratitude

Lomas et al. (2014) theorize that state gratitude requires the perception that a given situation involves (a) good things to be grateful for and (b) someone to be grateful to. Likewise, persistent patterns of gratitude (i.e. dispositional gratitude) may never develop without the perception that this world is (a) overflowing with wonderful things to be grateful for (*Enticing,* r = .71, page 312) and (b) animated by someone to be grateful to (*Alive,* r = .45, page 312). If so, strengthening these primals will increase gratitude.

Curiosity

People rarely search for what they do not expect to find. Likewise, persistent patterns of curiosity may largely develop in reaction to the perception that this world is full of *Interesting* phenomena (r = .59, page 318) and *Worth Exploring* (r = .42, page 318). If so, strengthening these primals will increase curiosity.

Hope (optimism)

People are naturally optimistic in situations believed to be inherently positive and with a natural tendency to heal, flourish, and otherwise improve. Likewise, patterns of optimism may develop largely in reaction to the perception that this world is fundamentally *Good* (r = .67, page 312) and *Regenerative* (r = .55, page 319). If so, strengthening these primals will increase optimism.

Interpersonal trust

People are less trusting in contexts perceived as dangerous. Likewise, persistent patterns of interpersonal trust may develop partly in reaction to the view that the world is generally *Safe* (r = .55, page 312). If so, strengthening this primal will increase trust.

Self-efficacy

People believe they can change a situation when they see themselves as competent enough, but also when they see the situation as plastic enough. Likewise, a persistent pattern of self-efficacy may develop partially in response to the underlying belief that the world is *Improvable* (r (122) = .59, page 503). If so, strengthening this primal will increase self-efficacy.

Using similar logic, one can expect *Enticing* to influence Zest; *Needs Me* to influence Perseverance (grit); *Alive* to influence Spirituality; *Good* to influence active destructive responding, and so forth.

Wellbeing outcomes

Positive emotions

Joy, contentment, and other positive emotions are difficult to experience in situations seen as awful. Likewise, positive emotions may more often elude those who see this world as awful (low *Good,* r = .63, page 312). If so, changing the belief will increase positive emotions.

Engagement

It is difficult to engage in places seen as boring. Likewise, a pattern of decreased engagement may result from seeing the world as dull and not worth exploring (low *Enticing;* r = .58, page 312). If so, changing that perception will increase engagement.

Meaning

It is difficult to achieve a sense of meaning in situations involving trivial matters, important matters impervious to change, or important matters that will change but without needing one's help. Likewise, a persistent sense of meaninglessness may develop in response to the belief that the world is a place where few things matter (low *Meaningful*; $r = .60$, page 319), little can be changed (low *Improvable;* $r = .40$, page 319), and one's efforts are not needed (low *Needs Me;* $r = .63$, page 319). If so, changing these beliefs will increase meaning.

Life satisfaction

It is difficult to find satisfaction in miserable, barren places. Likewise, life satisfaction may be partly a reaction to the believe that the world is generally *Pleasurable* ($r = .53$, page 320) and *Abundant* ($r = .47$, page 313). If so, strengthening these beliefs will increase life satisfaction.

Overall wellbeing

Finding happiness is difficult when residing in places one abhors. Likewise, as the opening quote elegantly states, achieving happiness in a world perceived as a *s**thole* is highly unlikely (i.e. low *Good;* $r = .66$, page 313). If so, changing that perception will increase overall wellbeing.

Using similar logic, one can expect *Enticing* to influence Accomplishment scores; *Safe* to influence Relationship scores; and so on.

A key critique and how to address it

Promising theory and large correlations notwithstanding, all such hypotheses are subject to the critique briefly mentioned above: primals could be mere symptoms – not causes – of each of these variables. For example, optimists may believe the world is *Good* because they are optimists and the curious may see the world as *Interesting* precisely because they are curious – the disposition comes first. Though empirical clues suggest this dismissal is unjustified, these clues require further empirical exploration before offering much certainty.

Of relevance to understanding the current state of primals research may be Beck's (e.g. Beck, 1963; Beck et al., 1979) experience convincing reluctant clinical researchers operating under a behaviorist paradigm that beliefs similar to primals shape depression. At first, despite similarly promising theory and correlational relationships, Beck's suggestion about beliefs was dismissed or ignored (e.g. Beidel & Turner, 1986; A. T. Beck, personal communication, 1 March 2019). This changed only after he designed an intervention – Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) – on the premise that these beliefs shaped depression and demonstrated CBT's effectiveness. Half a century later, CBT is the most widespread form of therapy and the role of beliefs in depression is broadly acknowledged (e.g. Field et al., 2014). With primals identified, measurable, and behaving in the nomological net as if they play a fundamental role in human psychology, the time is ripe for a similarly clear experimental demonstration revealing primals' causal role. This will require designing and testing interventions capable of altering primals, a task to which those studying PPIs are uniquely suited. .

Can primals be changed?

Some may note primals' marked stability over time and doubt if primals can be changed. Preliminary research also suggests that, rather than mirrors that reflect the content of our experiences, primals may function more like lenses used to interpret experiences while being themselves largely uninfluenced by them (Clifton, 2020a). Wealthy individuals, for example, do not see the world as more abundant. Even before the stability of primal world beliefs was apparent, similar beliefs were considered too fundamental, implicit, and self-reinforcing to allow for much change (e.g. Janoff-Bulman, 1989). But does observed stability really mean that primals cannot change? Of course not. Mountains are not unclimbable because no climbers have tried. As far as I can tell, most people are unaware of most of their primals and not seeking to change them (which would explain stability) and researchers have generally not tried to manipulate primals experimentally via targeted interventions.[1] Yet, in addition to CBT, a variety of interventions are already known to alter similar beliefs (Dweck, 2017) and many anecdotal accounts describe how primals change after, say, a semester abroad, a spiritual experience, a transformative friendship, and so forth. Unlike explicit beliefs, such as political views, which become entrenched, many individuals may come to hold their primals without deliberation or debate, and may be thus open to alternatives if they knew of them. Unlike undeniable beliefs dictated by sensory experience such as *the sky is blue*, the vast and heterogenous dataset that is *the world* could be used to sustain various contradictory perspectives. It matters where one directs attention and attention is often controllable.

Moreover, the wellbeing impact of some established PPIs may already be mediated by unintentionally altered primals. Three Good Things, Counting Blessings, the Gratitude Visit, Savoring a Past Positive Event, Savoring the Present, and Mindful Photography all involve focusing on positive aspects of an environment. Several are

explicitly premised on the notion of wellbeing change via altered environmental beliefs or attitudes (e.g. Smith et al., 2014). If so, why not the world environment? To summarize, the notion that primals are impossible to change must be tested. Experiments might either (a) test whether a change in primals mediates the impact of established interventions or (b) test novel interventions that target primals specifically.

What might a novel primals intervention look like?

Having spent the last few years focused on primals measurement, I only recently began considering intervention design and identifying elements that interventions should likely incorporate. To aid intervention creation among those who study PPIs, these reflections are provided alongside one untested illustrative example I call *The Leaf Exercise*.

Experiential

Implicit beliefs rarely change as a result of reasoned argumentation alone. Like most PPIs, primals interventions will likely involve a strong experiential element.

Educational

Some interventions may educate subjects on key issues. For example, initial research suggests negative primals are often perpetuated by demonstrably false beliefs about primals (i.e. meta-beliefs), including the assumption that most people see the world as we do (i.e. false consensus bias); one's negative experiences leaves no choice (e.g. *I have to see the world as barren because I grew up poor*); or utility demands it (e.g. *seeing the world as dangerous keeps me safe*)(Clifton, 2020a, 2020b). Some interventions may also highlight information that directly supports a primal (e.g. low crime statistics).

Motivational

Perhaps more important than information concerning which primals are true may be information concerning which primals are useful. Humans are talented at coming to believe what is (or appears) useful for achieving success and wellbeing. Even though doing so can introduce problematic demand effects that make it harder to test intervention efficacy, motivating a subject to want to believe differently may, in the long run, be the best way of changing primal world beliefs.

Attentional

Several biases – especially confirmation bias – focus attention on information consistent with pre-existing views, thereby perpetuating primals. Thus, like other PPIs, successful primals interventions may involve deliberate appreciation of disconfirming evidence and altering attentional habits.

Target a sense of scale

Primals concern a uniquely encompassing subject – the world as a whole. Interventions highlighting a part are unlikely to change one's view of the whole without speaking directly to how the part is typical of the whole. Experiencing a beautiful song or part of nature, for example, usually will not impart a belief that the world is beautiful.

Target particular primals

Some established PPIs such as Three Good Things currently target the positive in an untargeted way. The belief that the world is *Good*, for example, has three sub-beliefs – *Safe, Enticing*, and *Alive* – and only *Enticing* is uniquely related to gratitude (Clifton et al., 2019). *Enticing* also involves several sub-beliefs, including *Beautiful*. If a subject has especially low *Beautiful* scores, then, if the goal is to increase gratitude, a subject may benefit most from a Three *Beautiful* Things exercise which targets the most gratitude-relevant primal most immune to ceiling effects.

Target everyday objects

Some interventions may target everyday objects – like what one sees during a commute – so that repeated exposure engenders long-term reinforcement of the new primal. I call them *Homeland Tourism* exercises. The following intervention is an example that targets *Beautiful* by directing attention to leaves, though many other ubiquitous beautiful objects, such as snowflakes, could be used.

Example intervention: The Leaf Exercise

Step 1: Go to a local park or forest, pluck a leaf from a tree, examine it closely, and savor its beauty.
Step 3: Pluck another leaf. Repeat the savoring process. Notice how both leaves are unique – each with beauty all its own.
Step 4: Look up at your tree. Reflect on how each of its leaves is just as real, beautiful, and unique as the two you hold. (An average adult oak has about 250,000 leaves.)

Step 5: Look around you. Realize you are surrounded by trees full of beautiful leaves.
Step 6: Imagine all the leaves that currently exist, from Siberia to the Amazon. (There are currently over three trillion adult trees spread over 60,000 species.)
Step 7: Imagine all the leaves that existed in ages past, and will ever exist.
Step 8: Then ask yourself, what sort of world is this?

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to introduce a new idea to those in the positive psychology research community and highlight the opportunity to conduct basic research of some interdisciplinary importance to which those who study PPIs are uniquely suited. To determine if primals play anything like the central role envisioned, the pressing need is to (a) test if the wellbeing impact of established PPIs is mediated by primals and (b) create and test new interventions that target primals. In short, we must discover if the blogger is right. If it is difficult to be happy in a world perceived as a *sh**hole*, we must find ways to counter that perception.

Note

1. Three main literatures have previously examined primals: (a) I know of no efforts to change what political psychology researchers have called Belief in a Dangerous World. (b) Trauma researchers building on Janoff-Bulman's (1989) paradigm have studied how trauma impacts several primals without as far as I am aware, seeking to alter them via interventions. (c) The considerable experimental literature concerning Belief in a Just World has been historically focused on the Just-World Hypothesis – the motivational theory rather than the individual difference variable – and primarily involved manipulations to temporarily alter the belief's salience and not the belief itself (Hafer & Bègue, 2005).

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