



# World assumptions and the role of trauma in borderline personality disorder

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## Abstract

The present study tested whether borderline personality disorder (BPD) is characterized by specific worldviews as hypothesized by cognitive models, using Janoff-Bulman's [(1989) *Social Cognition*, 7, 113–136] world assumptive model of negative effects of trauma. A second aim of this study was to investigate the role of trauma in the content of worldviews of BPD patients. Fifteen BPD patients, 14 patients with Cluster C personality disorders (PD), 19 patients with axis-I psychopathology and 21 non-patients filled out the World Assumptions Scale, the Personality Disorder Belief Questionnaire, a childhood trauma checklist (assessing physical, emotional and sexual abuse) and the BPD Checklist (severity of BPD psychopathology).

BPD patients appear to view the world as malevolent and perceive less luck independent of trauma but dependent of BPD psychopathology. Furthermore, BPD patients have low self-worth and persist in specific beliefs independent of trauma or severity of BPD psychopathology. Pretzer's theory of BPD can be largely supported through Janoff-Bulman's world assumptive model. World assumptions of BPD patients can better be explained by the severity of BPD psychopathology than by the presence of trauma.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of worldviews or world assumptions was first defined by Parkes (1971) and Bowlby (1980). They referred to world assumptions as internal cognitive structures that provide expectations about the world, which enable the individual to develop goals for the future and regulate its daily functioning. World assumptions are built and solidified over many years. They often go unquestioned because of the individual's need to maintain stability (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). According to Beck, Freeman and Associates (1990), personality disorders (PD) are characterized by specific sets of assumptions. With respect to borderline personality disorder (BPD), Pretzer (1990) hypothesized that the basic assumptions focus on three themes: (1) the world is (i.e. others are) dangerous and malevolent, (2) I am powerless and vulnerable and (3) I am inherently unacceptable. Arntz (1994) and Arntz, Dietzel, and Dreesen (1999) demonstrated that a set of assumptions (assessed with the personality disorder belief questionnaire (PDBQ)), derived from the work by Pretzer (1990), were indeed specific for BPD and appeared to be stable. The BPD assumptions seem to constitute an essential characteristic of BPD.

In her work with victims of traumatic events, Janoff-Bulman (1989, 1991, 1992) found that most people usually operate on the basic belief of invulnerability. This invulnerability is more or less a derivative from the view that a sense of safety and security is fundamental for the development of a healthy personality and is first developed in early childhood through interaction with the environment. At the basis of personality stands a set of relatively stable fundamental cognitive, on invulnerability based, assumptions about the world en self (the so called assumptive world). Janoff-Bulman developed a heuristic model specifying the content of these invulnerability-related assumptions. Her model consists of three primary categories, with each category consisting of several assumptions. These categories are (1) perceived benevolence of the world, (2) meaningfulness of the world and (3) worthiness of self.

The first category involves a base rate notion of benevolence/malevolence and is represented by two basic assumptions: the benevolence of the impersonal world and the benevolence of people. The second category, meaningfulness of the world, refers to distributional principles. Assumptions in this category involve the belief that positive and negative events and outcomes are distributed according to the principles of justice (goodness or badness of one's moral character), controllability (engaging in appropriate or inappropriate behaviour) or chance (randomness, meaninglessness). These distributional assumptions do not necessarily exclude each other; people tend to believe in all three principles but to a various extent. Worthiness of self forms the third category and focuses on the self. The three self-relevant assumptions of this category parallel the mentioned distributional principles namely self-worth, self-controllability and luck. These self-relevant assumptions explicitly deal with the distributional principles on a personal, individual level in contrast with the assumptions of 'meaningfulness of the world'. For example, 'chance' assumptions concerns the random distribution of outcomes related to people in general whereas 'luck' regards this aspect to oneself. To explore and

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