

Grief and Culture: A Study on World Assumptions and Sense-Making in
Response to Bereavement in Seven Countries

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Abstract

Following a significant loss, many bereaved people may find their understanding of the world to have changed for the worse, causing them to embark on a quest to restore it. However, the question is whether this quest for meaning occurs in people whose view of the world was negative to begin with. As literature revealed that there is a higher incidence of such negative outlook in societies where the standard of living is low and power unequally distributed, the aim of this study was to see if people from these countries also have different grief reactions. This was done by comparing non-western and western societies on their world assumptions and sense-making engagement. For the purpose of assessing world assumptions, Meaningfulness of the World subscale of the World Assumptions scale by Janoff-Bulman (1989) was used, while one direct question was asked to determine respondents' sense-making engagement. In contrast to predictions, people from non-western societies showed a more positive belief in the world's meaningfulness than those from western societies, despite both groups not having suffered a significant loss in their lives. Interestingly enough, non-western people also showed to be more shaken in their world views once such loss has occurred. However, this did not translate into any differences in grief reactions. The study concludes with exploring possible causes of this, while noting the study limitations and suggesting future directions.

Keywords: bereavement, culture, grief, meaningfulness of the world, sense-making, world assumptions

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In contrast to past theories, viewing grief as a stage process that is presumably universal for all people, more recent ones are pointing out its meaning-seeking aspect, that largely involves each person's phenomenological world and its reconstruction after being shaken by a tragic event (Holland & Neimeyer, 2010; Neimeyer, 2001, 2006.). This world being built upon past experiences and individual's position within broader discourses of culture, gender and identity, the possible conditional effect of societal phenomena, causing subtle differences in each griever's reaction and engagement in making sense of a loss, is justified to be taken into account. The aim of this study is to see if such conditioning may be reflected in the effect of financial status and power distance, differing across countries, on people's pre-loss world views.

What is Meaning?

Throughout the literature, the concept of meaning proved to be hard to define, with many different approaches to its conceptualization existing. However, for the purpose of this study, the suggested focus is the theory of "assumptive worlds" proposed by Janoff-Bulman (1992).

The "assumptive world" reflects everything that one person holds true about the world and the self. The idea was first proposed by Parkes (1988), who pointed those assumptions to be formed through past experience and, once formed, reinforced or changed by new events. The concept was later elaborated by Janoff-Bulman (1989) and split into three core assumptions about the benevolence of the world, its meaningfulness and the worthiness of the self. She later went on to further divide each of these aspects and the meaningfulness of the world ended up consisting of beliefs about the world's controllability, randomness and justice. The two subdomains, justice and controllability, have been described to be what

constitutes “sense of meaning” (Frankl, 1963), but are highly dependable on the third subdomain of randomness, as the highly positive belief that tragic events are only caused by chance makes them unworthy of regard (Janoff-Bulman, 1991). For this reason, it seems favorable to focus on the mentioned domain that assembles these subdomains, when studying the process of making sense of a loss.

Sense-Making in Response to Bereavement

Constructivist grief theories hold that, as the mentioned assumptive world of one person gets shattered by trauma and tragic, the person stays without any guidelines to use in order to interpret events and navigate through life (Kaufmann, 2002). As their basic beliefs get disrupted, people engage in an active effort to assimilate or accommodate such a disruption (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

In reconstructing their beliefs about the world, sense-making seems to be a crucial component and refers to how well the potentially traumatic event fits into the one’s “assumptive worldview” (Parkes, 1971). In his model of meaning-reconstruction, integrating most of the constructivist theories, Neimeyer (2006) suggests that the more the loss is inconsistent with one’s pre-loss meanings, the more provoked is the search for sense. In other words, if a loss makes sense to a certain person, the whole experience is less disruptive and only reinforces existing structures.

Previous Findings

Janoff-Bulman’s theory has been extensively researched and most of the research involved comparing world assumptions of people who have not experienced trauma with assumptions of those who did. The expectation of differences has been confirmed by findings, one of which showing that, when compared to non-bereaved, bereaved students are less likely to hold beliefs about a meaningful world (Janoff-Bulman & Schwartzberg, 1991). Furthermore, the two student groups failed to differ in terms of views on the benevolence of

the world and self-worth, which is yet another reason for focusing the study on the chosen subdomain that is the world's meaningfulness. However, the theory has been criticized for its holding that all people have positive assumptions prior to loss and that such positive views are healthy and normal (Gilfus, 1999). As for the claim of the effect of discrepancy in pre- and post-loss assumptions motivating the searching for sense, its biggest support may come from research on the impact of violent and highly unexpected deaths on the process of grieving, such as one conducted by Currier, Holland and Neimeyer (2006). The authors concluded that the reaction to death by accident, homicide or suicide hugely motivated a search for sense in survivors, with that search being at a higher risk of failure since the given nature of these deaths is so hard to fit into people's existing core assumptions of a world that is just and orderly. In addition, sense-making proved to be a crucial component of meaning-restoration, as such failure was found to likely be accompanied by complications in the mourning process.

The concept of a meaningful world resembling that of a "just world", proposed by Lerner (1980), studies on this theory will also be taken into account. The theory proposes that people, by believing in a world that is just, provide themselves with reassurance that "bad things" can only happen to "bad people", which gives them a sense of security. Heider (1958) has described this belief to be a consequence of human cognitive tendency, similar to the mentioned need to find sense and purpose. However, not all people have been found to hold the same positive views as studies have affirmed the assumption that world views may vary with perceived and evaluated inequality, social-identity variables, religiousness, authoritarianism and social attitudes (Rim, 1983; Rubin & Peplau, 1975; Smith & Green, 1984). Lerner (1974) himself claimed that this is not only a consequence of adopting certain cultural norms, but also the extent to which one has a sense of being able to control outcomes by personal actions. In addition, Rubin and Peplau (1975) have assumed a significant effect

of one's life experience, just as Janoff-Bulman did in her theory on world assumptions. Given this study's suggested focus, the most relevant findings are that of Smith and Green (1984), who found more negative beliefs in the world's justice in lower-income groups, and Furnham (1993), who significantly correlated such a belief with the cultural dimension of power-distance by finding more negative beliefs in the group of people that held less power. These findings are consistent with the Rubin's and Peplau's logic of expecting the belief in a just world to be present to a degree to which an individual, or a group of individuals, had direct experience with injustice, which is expected to be more of a case in the lives of people of low economic and societal power.

Current Study

Given the abovementioned findings and validations of chosen theoretical frameworks, the present study would primarily focus on the presumption that not all people have positive world assumptions prior to a significant loss in their lives. This notion seems justified by pointing out the found correlations of income and societal power with people's views on the world, which are this study's suggested variables. Based on these variables, the countries included in this research are expected to be clearly differentiated, with one group consisting of western and the other of non-western countries, with the former being the higher-income, lower power-distance and of more positive belief in the world's meaningfulness. The discrepancy in world beliefs being proven to exist between bereaved and non-bereaved people, this difference is expected even in countries consisting of people having negative views on the world's meaningfulness without suffering a significant loss, but with that discrepancy being significantly lower in that case. Finally, as sense-making engagement in grief is seen as conditioned by the loss-caused assumptions discrepancy, expected to be seen are differences when comparing the bereaved group of lower income and higher power-

distance with its opposite, with that engagement being less prevalent in the grieving reactions of people of lower income and power and, therefore, discrepancy in assumptions.

Methodology

Study Design and Sampling

To test the given hypotheses, a correlational study with a cross-sectional design was conducted. The study was a part of a larger collaborative project between 16 students at Utrecht University, coming from Greece, Germany, the Netherlands, Turkey, Serbia, Lebanon and the US – the seven countries included in the study. By means of online surveying, quantitative data was gathered, enabling for the strength of relationship between variables to be assessed. Income and power distance being independent variables, they were expected to correlate with the dependent variable of sense-making in response to bereavement, mediated by the discrepancy in the belief in world's meaningfulness caused by a loss. However, rather than assessing the selected variables by surveying the same people, once prior and once following a loss, the research question was addressed by testing and comparing samples of bereaved and non-bereaved people from each country included in the study at one single point in time.

The exact sampling and recruitment methods slightly varied between countries and between subsamples. For the subsample of the bereaved, it had been specifically reached out to several grief support groups in Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Turkey and the U.S. The remainder of the given countries' participants in the subsample were recruited through social media and by means of the "snowball" method. As Serbia and Lebanon were the only countries that do not own any known grief support groups, their bereaved participants were recruited solely in these ways, and so did the subsample of the non-bereaved for all five countries.

Sample Characteristics

A total of 2392 responses has been recorded, with 204 of them treated as invalid either because the respondents did not specify their country or failed to answer the question on bereavement, disabling their further classification within the sample. The valid remainder of the sample, counting 2188 respondents, will be described in terms of the two groups of included countries, split by their measured power distance and economic standard, and the subgroups of the bereaved and the non-bereaved within each of them. This is followed by a more detailed overview presented in Table 1 and Table 2, and results of a statistical comparison of the given groups by their characteristics (Table 3).

High-income, low-power distance group. Within the group of HI/LPD countries, a total of 808 participants has completed the questionnaire, with 540 of them having stated themselves as bereaved. Among the bereaved, 40,7% of them were from the Netherlands, 36,5% from the US and the remaining 22,8% were from Germany. The median age of the subsample came at 43 years. Most of the respondents were female (78,7%), partnered (53,4%) and resided within large cities (49,6%). The subsample was scattered across all educational levels past primary school. Participants were mostly either Christian, with 27,1% protestants and 21,9% Roman Catholics, or non-religious (27,9%). For the remainder of the sample, consisting of 268 non-bereaved respondents, figures did not differ much from those of the bereaved, with the exception of a higher percentage of those that declared themselves as single (48% compared to 32,7%) and the overall median age of the subsample being 25,50 years.

Looking at bereavement-specific variables, the loss suffered by the bereaved was mostly either that of a parent (27,1%), or other second-degree relative (24,4%), followed by the loss of a friend (17,2%) and a child (14,3%), with the relation to this person described as close in 88,3% of the cases. Median length of bereavement was 24 months, while the cause of death was mostly either a long (40,2%) or a sudden illness (30,9%).

Low-income, high-power distance group. A total of 1380 respondents can be classified within the group of LI/HPD countries. Classified as bereaved were 866 of them, mostly coming from Greece (37,6%), followed by Turkey (25,9%), Serbia (20,2%) and Lebanon (16,3%). Of these participants, 57,5% were female and 42,4% were male, with the median age of 28 years. The sample is predominantly urban (80,6%), mostly single (60,5%) and of higher level of education, with 42,4% of undergraduates and 30,6% of graduates. Respondents mostly declared themselves as either Orthodox (40,1%), or non-religious (28,3%). None of the given figures differed enough to be reported in the case of the subsample of 514 non-bereaved respondents in the group.

The bereaved subsample was mostly consisting of those who lost a second-degree relative (51,5%). A much smaller, but still significant figure was calculated for the loss of a parent (22,4%), while 11,9% of respondents reported the loss of a friend. Respondents described the relation to the deceased as close in 79% of the cases. Median time since the loss was 26,95 months, and the most often reported cause of death either a long (43,9%), or a sudden illness (36,3%).

Table 1.*Demographic characteristics by group*

Country group	High-income, low-power distance		Low-income, high-power distance	
	Yes (n=540)	No (n=268)	Yes (n=866)	No (n=514)
Bereavement				
Age (in years)				
Range	16-78	15-77	16-73	15-96
Mean	41,64	34,57	33,33	31,36
Median	43,00	25,50	28,00	26,00
Standard deviation	15,951	16,534	12,636	11,906
Country of residence N (%)				
Germany	123 (22,8)	81 (30,2)		
Netherlands	230 (40,7)	109 (40,7)		
United States	197 (36,5)	78 (36,5)		
Greece			326 (37,6)	193 (37,5)
Turkey			224 (25,9)	188 (36,6)
Serbia			175 (20,2)	87 (16,9)
Lebanon			141 (16,3)	46 (8,9)
Gender				
Female	317 (78,7)	134 (68,4)	410 (57,5)	249 (66,8)
Male	86 (21,3)	61 (31,1)	302 (42,4)	124 (33,2)
Other		1 (0,5)	1 (0,1)	
Area of residence N (%)				
Large city	196 (49,6)	108 (55,1)	574 (80,6)	330 (82,3)
Suburban/Small town	93 (23,5)	32 (16,3)	81 (11,4)	40 (10,0)
Rural town/Village	106 (26,8)	56 (28,6)	57 (8)	31 (7,7)
Marital status N (%)				
Married/Living together	212 (53,4)	93 (47,4)	236 (33,3)	108 (26,9)
Widowed	24 (6)	3 (1,5)	19 (2,7)	4 (1)
Divorced	31 (7,8)	6 (3,1)	25 (3,5)	18 (4,5)
Single	130 (32,7)	94 (48,0)	428 (60,5)	271 (67,6)
Level of education N (%)				
Primary school	5 (1,2)	2 (1,0)	6 (0,8)	1 (0,2)
High school	68 (17,0)	50 (25,5)	79 (11,1)	59 (14,6)
Vocational school	78 (19,5)	28 (14,3)	83 (11,7)	35 (8,7)
Some university	104 (25,9)	36 (18,4)	24 (3,4)	8 (2,0)
University – undergraduate	87 (21,7)	51 (26,0)	302 (42,4)	179 (44,3)
University – graduate	59 (14,7)	29 (14,8)	218 (30,6)	122 (30,2)
Religious affiliation N (%)				
Christian – Orthodox	35 (8,7)	13 (6,6)	285 (40,1)	149 (36,8)
Christian – Protestant	109 (27,1)	58 (29,6)	22 (3,1)	22 (5,4)
Christian – Roman Catholic	88 (21,9)	26 (13,3)	2 (0,3)	2 (0,5)
Jewish	25 (6,2)		55 (7,7)	1 (0,2)
Muslim – Shia		1 (0,5)	4 (0,6)	4 (1,0)
Muslim – Sunni	4 (1,0)	1 (0,5)	84 (11,8)	72 (17,8)
Muslim – Alaouite			6 (0,8)	5 (1,2)
Buddhist	2 (0,5)	10 (5,1)	12 (1,7)	3 (0,7)
Other	27 (6,7)	33 (16,8)	39 (5,5)	35 (8,6)
Not religious	112 (27,9)	54 (27,6)	201 (28,3)	112 (27,7)

Table 2.*Bereavement-related characteristics of the bereaved by group*

Country group	High-income, low-power distance (n=540)	Low-income, high-power distance (n=866)
Time since loss (in months)		
Mean	26,95	28,54
Median	24,00	24,00
Standard deviation	18,843	22,777
Relation to the deceased N (%)		
Spouse/Partner	26 (6,9)	19 (2,9)
Parent	102 (27,1)	145 (22,4)
Child	54 (14,3)	6 (0,9)
Sibling	10 (2,7)	19 (2,9)
Grandchild	2 (0,5)	
Other second-degree relative	92 (24,4)	333 (51,5)
Friend	65 (17,2)	77 (11,9)
Other	26 (6,9)	47 (7,3)
Cause of death N (%)		
A long illness/health problem	151 (40,2)	283 (43,9)
A sudden illness/health problem	116 (30,9)	234 (36,3)
Accident	37 (9,8)	47 (7,3)
Homicide	3 (0,8)	6 (0,9)
Suicide	24 (6,4)	23 (3,6)
Unknown	9 (2,4)	16 (2,5)
Other	36 (9,6)	36 (5,6)
Closeness to the deceased N (%)		
Extremely distant	2 (0,5)	7 (1,1)
Distant	8 (2,2)	29 (4,5)
Somewhat close	33 (8,9)	99 (15,4)
Close	141 (38,2)	210 (32,7)
Extremely close	185 (50,1)	298 (46,3)

Having been tested for significance at the level of $p < .05$, all of the groups to be compared differed in their religious affiliation ($p < .001$), which was to be expected considering the main religions of each of the given countries. The two subgroups of the non-bereaved also differed in their age ($p = .017$), area of residence ($p < .001$), marital status ($p < .001$) and educational level ($p < .001$), with the LI/HPD group being one that is younger, more urban, more often single and of higher education. The same was the case with the two subsamples of the bereaved, with the addition of those from the LI/HPD group being more

gender balanced with less females ($p<.001$). Concerning the loss-related characteristics, the subsamples significantly differed by cause of death ($p=.027$) and relation to the deceased ($p<.001$), with a higher incidence of loss of a second-degree relative in the LI/HPD group, and a notable proportion of those who reported the loss of a child being observed in the HI/LPD group, which could further explain the discrepancy in closeness ($p=.006$).

Within the HI/LPD, the bereaved differed from the non-bereaved in terms of having more females ($p=.011$), being older ($p<.001$), less often single ($p<.001$), and of a higher educational level ($p=.048$). With the exception of education, differentiation within the LI/HPD group is based on the same variables, where the more gender-balanced bereaved ($p=.010$) were also older ($p=.011$) and more often single ($p=.023$).

Table 3.

Calculation of significance of differences on figures in Table 1 and Table 2

Variable	Between group				Within group			
	Bereaved		Non-bereaved		HI/LPD		LI/HPD	
	Test statistics	<i>p-value</i>						
Age	$t=8.97$	<.001	$t=2.41$	.017	$t=5.02$	<.001	$t=2.53$	.011
Gender	$\chi^2=50.97$	<.001	$\chi^2=2.13$	.345	$\chi^2=9.05$	<.011	$\chi^2=9.16$	.010
Area of residence	$\chi^2=119.56$	<.001	$\chi^2=56.91$	<.001	$\chi^2=4.14$	.126	$\chi^2=.61$	.738
Marital status	$\chi^2=80.50$	<.001	$\chi^2=25.74$	<.001	$\chi^2=19.56$	<.001	$\chi^2=9.56$	.023
Level of education	$\chi^2=189.02$	<.001	$\chi^2=86.47$	<.001	$\chi^2=11.19$	.048	$\chi^2=8.17$	.147
Religious affiliation	$\chi^2=410.02$	<.001	$\chi^2=203.87$	<.001	$\chi^2=48.12$	<.001	$\chi^2=46.69$	<.001
Time since loss	$t=1.12$	.262						
Relation to the deceased	$\chi^2=134.02$	<.001						
Cause of death	$\chi^2=14.25$	.027						
Closeness to the deceased	$\chi^2=14.58$	.006						

Measures

Income and power distance. An individual's income is most often determined by asking a simple, direct and often closed-ended question (Galaborades & Demares, 2003). However, such question often results in non-response (Galaborades & Demares, 2003; Turrell, 2000).

For this reason, understood as the strictly material standard of living, income was determined by taking the measure of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, a measure most widely used for this purpose. Data on GDP has been taken from the dataset produced by the World Bank (2016) and is expressed in Purchasing Power Parities (PPP). The PPPs diminish the discrepancy in price levels across countries, allowing for a more accurate GDP comparison.

Power distance was determined by using Hofstede's power distance index (PDI) scores of each country. PDI measures the degree of inequality in a society and the extent to which uneven distribution of power and wealth, resulting from this inequality, is expected and accepted by less powerful members of that society (Hofstede, 1980). Furthermore, the dimension of power distance has been found to significantly correlate with national wealth (Hofstede, 2011). With this correlation being highly negative, those countries with higher PDI are expected to have a lower GDP and vice versa, making for an easier and clearer grouping of countries.

In the current study, the 7 countries, whose data was obtainable, were split in two, based on the abovementioned measures of economic standard (GDP) and power distance (PDI). The overview of this grouping is given in Table 3.

With the PDI being ordered from lowest to highest, and the GDP from highest to lowest, a clear line can be drawn within the 7 countries. The first group is, therefore, the one with the higher income and lower power distance (HI/LPD), and includes Germany, the Netherlands and the US, while the second group is the one consisting of countries characterized by a lower income and higher power distance (LI/HPD), which are Greece, Lebanon, Serbia and Turkey.

Table 4.

Classification of countries based on measured power distance and gross domestic product per capita

Country	PDI ^a	Country	GDP per capita, PPP (current international dollars) ^b
Germany	35	Unites States	57,638.2
Netherlands	38	Netherlands	50,538.6
United States	40	Germany	48,860.5
Greece	60	Greece	26,778.5
Turkey	66	Turkey	25,247.2
Lebanon	75	Serbia	14,515.0
Serbia	86	Lebanon	14,308.8

Source: ^aMinkov. (2010); ^bWorld Bank, *International Comparison Program database (2016)*

Demographic and bereavement-related characteristics. Individual demographic

information was obtained by means of a brief questionnaire consisting of basic demographic questions, specifically those on country and area of residence, nationality, gender, age, education, marital status and religious affiliation.

For the purpose of dividing participants between the two subsamples, the question on bereavement was included. By being asked whether they “have suffered a significant loss in the last 5 years”, participants were classified either as those that are bereaved, or those that are not. In the case of a suffered loss, additional questions related to the loss were asked. In response the question on the nature of the loss, respondents would specify the loss as that due to a long illness, a sudden illness, accident, homicide, suicide, or other/unknown, and label the deceased as their spouse/partner, parent, child, sibling, grandchild, other second-degree relative, friend or other. Bereaved respondents were also asked to give the exact number of months elapsed since the loss and rate their closeness to the deceased on a slider controlling a 5-point scale: extremely distant, distant, somewhat close, close, extremely close (see Appendix A).

Belief in a meaningful world. To assess the belief in the world's meaningfulness, the subscale Meaningfulness of the World of the World Assumptions Scale, developed by Janoff-Bulman (1989), was used. The WAS scale is the most commonly used measure of beliefs in the aftermath of adversity and is closely related to the chosen theoretical framework that is her theory of shattered assumptions (1992) (Elklit et al., 2007). The subscale features 12 items that indicate assumptions related to the world's meaningfulness and can be further separated into three 4-item domains. The domain "justice" consists of statements such as *Generally, people deserve what they get in this world*, the domain of "control" features items such as *Through our actions, we can prevent bad things from happening*, while an example of the "randomness" domain's item is *Bad events are distributed to people at random*. All items are rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Several items are reverse scored and possible scores for the whole subscale range from 12 to 84, with the higher scores indicating stronger belief in the world's meaningfulness.

Initial reliability tests, performed by Janoff-Bulman (1989) herself, demonstrated the subscale's sufficient reliability. However, recent research has shown its Chronbach's alpha to be typically in the .50 - .70 range (Elklit, Shevlin, Solomon & Dekel, 2007; Kaler et al., 2008). In the present study, the overall reliability was $\alpha=.694$. Although this coefficient cannot be considered particularly high, it does fall within the average range and is deemed acceptable.

Sense-making in response to bereavement. In previous studies, the assessment of sense-making has most often consisted of asking a single direct question (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010). Hence, to determine their sense-making engagement in response to bereavement, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they "tried to make sense of the loss" on a slider controlling a 7-point scale. For the non-bereaved sample, the same question was given

in the form that asked about the extent to which they agree that “it is necessary to find sense in a loss of a close person”.

Instrument Preparation

Measures given in English were translated into official spoken languages of each country, making for a total of 6 translations. The English version (see Appendix B) was given to both the Lebanese and the US sample. The translations were done by the students working on the project, each assigned to do the translation in the target language based on their country of origin. Hence, a total of 6 students were assigned to do the Greek version (see Appendix C), 3 students were translating into Turkish (see Appendix D), while there was only one student in the case of the Netherlands (see Appendix E), Germany (see Appendix F) and Serbia (see Appendix G). The measures were not back-translated.

With more students included in the translation process, the Turkish and the Greek version of the measures are more easily assumed reliable, as students had the chance to collaborate and review each other’s work. The lack of translators from other countries was made up for by students doing these translations discussing their work and being transparent about any major changes that had to be made to the literal translation, in order to ensure conceptual equivalence and preserve content validity.

All language versions of the survey were prepared for administration via the Qualtrics electronic survey platform (www.qualtrics.com) The survey was set up to display only those questions relevant to an individual participant in the language appropriate for that participant’s nationality. The survey was made to be open access and was anonymous by default. However, IP addresses were still collected. Participants were enabled to skip most of the questions, except those in the demographics section, and were able to terminate their participation at any time by closing the browser window with the survey.

Procedure

Upon being contacted and agreeing to participate in the study, participants were sent a hyperlink taking them to the survey. After reading the informed consent (see Appendix H) and confirming their participation, the respondents were taken to the question asking about their country of residence. Depending on their answer, they were presented with one of the 6 translated versions of the survey. For those participants that provided a negative answer to the question on bereavement, other questions related to nature of the loss were automatically skipped. Similarly, these participants were also given the differently formulated question on sense-making than those that responded affirmatively to the question asking them whether they have suffered a significant loss.

The duration of completing the survey was 20 minutes on average. This included both the measures used in this study and those of other students involved in the project, who had their own study hypotheses. Furthermore, due to the sensitive nature of some of the questions included, most of them were not given in the format of forced choice. Hence, even if the participants did not finish the questionnaire completely, their data was still used.

Statistical Analysis

All data was statistically analysed using MS Excel 2007 and IBM SPSS v21 and checked for normality. Basic features of the samples and subsamples were assessed using descriptive statistics and compared by performing chi-square tests for categorical and t-tests for quantitative variables. Variables on which the results of these tests were significant were treated as covariates and controlled for by performing ANCOVA to test each of the hypotheses. The assumption of homogeneity of variance was tested using Levene's Test of Equality of Variances. Significance level was set at $\alpha=0.05$, while size effects were measured using partial eta squared (η^2p) and interpreted according to Cohen's guidelines (1988).

Results

The given research question can be broken down into three different hypotheses that underpin the study. For each one, data was collected and analysed, and the results presented separately, as follows.

Despite not having suffered a significant loss in the last 5 years, non-bereaved people from LI/HPD countries have a more negative belief in the world's meaningfulness than the non-bereaved from HI/LPD countries. A One-way ANCOVA was conducted to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the non-bereaved people from LI/HPD and HI/LPD countries on the belief in a meaningful world controlling for age, area of residence, marital status, level of education and religious affiliation. There was a significant difference in the belief in a meaningful world [$F=(1,392)=7.24, p=.007$] between the non-bereaved from LI/HPD ($M=43.54, SD=8.60$) and HI/LPD ($M=40.39, SD=9.26$) countries, while adjusting for age, area of residence, marital status, level of education and religious affiliation. The partial eta squared statistic ($\eta^2p=.018$) indicates a small effect size.

Table 5.

ANCOVA results comparing the non-bereaved on belief in a meaningful world

Independent variable	Dependent variable	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p-value</i>	η^2p
Main effects					
HI/LPD vs LI/HPD	Meaningfulness of the world	1	7.24	.007	.018
Covariates					
Age	Meaningfulness of the world	1	.01	.915	.000
Area of residence	Meaningfulness of the world	1	.66	.419	.002
Marital status	Meaningfulness of the world	1	.14	.711	.000
Level of education	Meaningfulness of the world	1	.09	.765	.000
Religious affiliation	Meaningfulness of the world	1	4.70	.031	.012

The hypothesis was rejected. Non-bereaved people from LI/HPD countries in fact have a more positive belief in the world's meaningfulness than the non-bereaved from

HI/LPD countries, regardless of both groups not having suffered a significant loss in their lives.

In both LI/HPD and HI/LPD countries, people who have suffered a significant loss in the last 5 years have a more negative belief in the world's meaningfulness than those without a suffered loss. Two One-way ANCOVAs were conducted to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the bereaved and the non-bereaved from HI/LPD countries and between the bereaved and the non-bereaved from LI/HPD countries.

In the case of HI/LPD countries, the hypothesis was tested while controlling for age, gender, marital status, level of education and religious affiliation. There was no significant difference in the belief in a meaningful world [$F(1,290)=.30, p=.583, \eta^2p=.001$] between the bereaved ($M=39.87, SD=9.26$) and the non-bereaved ($M=40.39, SD=9.26$) within the group of HI/LPD countries, while adjusting for age, gender, marital status, level of education and religious affiliation.

Table 6.

ANCOVA results comparing the bereaved with the non-bereaved of HI/LPD countries on belief in a meaningful world

Independent variable	Dependent variable	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p-value</i>	η^2p
Main effects					
Bereavement	Meaningfulness of the world	1	.30	.583	.001
Covariates					
Age	Meaningfulness of the world	1	.55	.135	.008
Gender	Meaningfulness of the world	1	.66	.461	.002
Marital status	Meaningfulness of the world	1	2.15	.144	.007
Level of education	Meaningfulness of the world	1	.01	.798	.000
Religious affiliation	Meaningfulness of the world	1	5.00	.026	.017

In the case of LI/HPD countries, the hypothesis was tested while controlling for age, gender, marital status and religious affiliation. There was a significant difference [$F(1,581)=8.10, p=.005$] in the belief in a meaningful world between the bereaved ($M=41.34, SD=9.87$) and the non-bereaved ($M=43.47, SD=8.64$) within the group of LI/HPD countries,

while adjusting for age, gender, marital status and religious affiliation. The partial eta squared statistic ($\eta^2p=.014$) indicates a small effect size.

Table 7.

ANCOVA results comparing the bereaved with the non-bereaved of LI/HPD countries on belief in a meaningful world

Independent variable	Dependent variable	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p-value</i>	η^2p
Main effect					
Bereavement	Meaningfulness of the world	1	8.10	.005	.014
Covariates					
Age	Meaningfulness of the world	1	.71	.706	.000
Gender	Meaningfulness of the world	1	.60	.603	.000
Marital status	Meaningfulness of the world	1	.05	.046	.007
Religious affiliation	Meaningfulness of the world	1	.78	.773	.000

The hypothesis was partially rejected. Within LI/HPD countries, bereaved people do have a more negative belief in the world's meaningfulness than the non-bereaved. However, this is not the case between the bereaved and the non-bereaved within HI/LPD countries, where the two groups are equal on their belief in a meaningful world.

Assuming people from LI/HPD countries have a more negative belief in the world's meaningfulness without having suffered a significant loss, both the bereaved and the non-bereaved from these countries engage, or think it is necessary to engage, in sense-making in response to bereavement less than those from HI/LPD countries. Two One-way ANCOVAs were conducted to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the bereaved people from LI/HPD and HI/LPD countries and between the non-bereaved from LI/HPD and HI/LPD countries on sense-making engagement in response to bereavement.

In the case of the bereaved, the hypothesis was tested while controlling for age, gender, area of residence, marital status, level of education, religious affiliation, relation to the deceased, cause of death and closeness to the deceased. There was no significant difference on sense-making engagement [$F=(1,367)=.00$, $p=.972$, $\eta^2p=.000$] between the

bereaved from LI/HPD ($M=4.94$, $SD=1.89$) and HI/LPD ($M=4.97$, $SD=1.75$) countries, while adjusting for age, gender, area of residence, marital status, level of education, religious affiliation, relation to the deceased, cause of death and closeness to the deceased.

Table 8.

ANCOVA results comparing the bereaved on sense-making engagement

Independent variable	Dependent variable	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p-value</i>	η^2p
Main effects					
HI/LPD vs LI/HPD	Sense-making	1	.00	.972	.000
Covariates					
Age	Sense-making	1	5.20	.023	.014
Gender	Sense-making		.59	.444	.002
Area of residence	Sense-making	1	4.15	.042	.011
Marital status	Sense-making	1	.16	.687	.000
Level of education	Sense-making	1	1.59	.209	.004
Religious affiliation	Sense-making	1	1.24	.266	.003
Relation to the deceased	Sense-making	1	1.47	.226	.004
Cause of death	Sense-making	1	.93	.336	.003
Closeness to the deceased	Sense-making	1	3.29	.071	.009

In the case of the non-bereaved, the hypothesis was tested while controlling for age, area of residence, marital status, level of education and religious affiliation. There was no significant difference in sense-making engagement [$F=(1,360)=.10$, $p=.758$, $\eta^2p=.000$] between the non-bereaved from LI/HPD ($M=4.44$, $SD=1.85$) and HI/LPD ($M=4.41$, $SD=1.59$) countries, while adjusting for age, area of residence, marital status, level of education and religious affiliation.

Table 9.*ANCOVA results comparing the non-bereaved on sense-making engagement*

Independent variable	Dependent variable	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p-value</i>	η^2p
Main effects					
HI/LPD vs LI/HPD	Sense-making	1	.10	.758	.000
Covariates					
Age	Sense-making	1	6.38	.012	.017
Area of residence	Sense-making	1	.54	.464	.001
Marital status	Sense-making	1	1.48	.225	.004
Level of education	Sense-making	1	.02	.892	.000
Religious affiliation	Sense-making	1	.66	.419	.002

The hypothesis was rejected. Bereaved people from both LI/HPD and HI/LPD countries equally engage in sense-making in response to bereavement, while the non-bereaved from both LI/HPD and HI/LPD are equal in terms of considering that engagement as necessary.

Discussion

As seen from the results, people of different socioeconomic background could indeed vary in how they perceive the world. However, despite being more likely to have a direct experience of power inequities and economic hardships, people from non-western societies do not seem to believe in a less meaningful world than those from western societies. If anything, their world view appears to be slightly more positive, although, in general, best described as neutral. This is out of line with previous findings that revealed concepts similar to that of a meaningful world to be dependable on the same social and economic factors examined in this study, but in the opposite direction (Furnham, 1993; Smith & Green, 1984).

Findings further suggest sense-making as indeed an important aspect of grief and equally so across both western and non-western countries. Still, what the current study failed to prove is that the nature of world assumptions is affected by loss and is, therefore, what drives this need to search for sense, as suggested by Janoff-Bulman (1992). Regardless of the beliefs held both prior and after a loss, and the discrepancy between them, sense-making

engagement remained the same across the two country groups observed in this study.

However, what should be noted is that the mentioned discrepancy has only been observed in the case of low-income, high-power distance non-western societies.

The overall neutrality of world assumptions observed in this study was to be expected, as positive beliefs, frequently observed in childhood, tend to decrease with age (Dalbert, 2001). Other, unexpected findings, are harder to explain. Preserved non-negative view of the world in the face of social inequities could serve the purpose of helping the acceptance of the status quo in those most affected by it (Jost, Banaji & Nosek, 2004). While this does offer an explanation for the beliefs of the non-bereaved non-western people observed in this study, it fails to recognize why these people seem to be more affected by loss. As the measure of used in this study assesses the belief in a “general” just world, it could be that scores on it do not at all indicate a person’s “buffer” against more personal hardships (Bègue & Muller, 2006). If questioned on how they think they themselves are treated, rather than how they consider people in general to be, perhaps these respondents would indeed show a more negative view of the world’s fairness than those living in better socioeconomic conditions. Doing so could be a recommendation for future research that would then also assess possible differences in grief reactions.

Finally, it could be noteworthy to add that, apart from the seemingly inadequate research instrument, the current study also had several other limitations. Firstly, the measures not being back-translated leaves space to assume some of the translations were not optimally effective. Secondly, the convenience of using snowball-sampling could have come at a cost of biased samples. Finally, exploring a large-scale phenomenon, such as the one at hand, could have benefited from a larger sample. A study that would overcome these obstacles could yield more reliable and generalizable results.

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Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire

1. Where are you from?

___ Ελλάδα

___ Türkiye

___ Srbija

___ Deutschland

___ Nederland

___ United States

___ Lebanon

2. What is your age?

3. What is your gender?

___ Female

___ Male

___ Other

4. Where do you live?

___ Large city

___ Suburban/Small town

___ Rural town/Village

5. What is your marital status?

___ Married/Living together

___ Widowed

___ Divorced

___ Single

6. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

___ Primary school

___ High school

___ Vocational school

___ Some university

___ University – undergraduate

___ University – graduate

7. What is your religious affiliation?

___ Christian – Orthodox

___ Christian – Protestant

___ Christian – Roman Catholic

___ Jewish

___ Muslim – Shia

___ Muslim – Sunni

___ Muslim – Alaouite

___ Buddhist

___ Not religious

8. Have you experienced a death of someone close to you within the past five years?

___ Yes

___ No

9. How long ago did that individual die? (in months)

10. The deceased was your...

___ Spouse/Partner

___ Parent

- Child
- Sibling
- Grandchild
- Other second-degree relative
- Friend
- Other

11. Please indicate what was the cause of death.

- A long illness/health problem
- A sudden illness/health problem
- Accident
- Homicide
- Suicide
- Other
- Unknown

12. How close was your relationship with the person who died?

- Extremely distant
- Distant
- Somewhat close
- Close
- Extremely close

Appendix B

Survey Instrument (English)

Meaningfulness of the World subscale of The World Assumption Scale (Janoff-Bulman, 1989) Items – Official English Version

1. Misfortune is less likely to strike worthy, decent people.
2. Bad events are distributed to people at random.
3. The course of our lives is largely determined by chance.
4. Generally, people deserve what they get in this world.
5. People's misfortunes result from mistakes.
6. People will experience good fortune if they themselves are good.
7. Life is too full of uncertainties that are determined by chance.
8. By and large, good people get what they deserve in this world.
9. Through our actions we can prevent bad things from happening.
10. If people took preventive actions, most misfortune could be avoided.
11. In general, life is mostly random.
12. When bad things happen, it is typically because people have not taken the necessary actions to protect themselves.

Single-Item Sense-Making Measure

Bereaved form: I tried to make sense of the loss.

Non-bereaved form: I think it is necessary to find sense in a loss when someone close to you dies.

Appendix C

Survey Instrument (Greek)

Meaningfulness of the World subscale of The World Assumption Scale (Janoff-Bulman, 1989) Items – Translated Greek Version

1. Ατυχή γεγονότα συμβαίνουν σπανιότερα σε ευκατάστατους, τίμιους ανθρώπους.
2. Ατυχή γεγονότα μπορεί να συμβούν στον καθένα.
3. Η πορεία της ζωής μας καθορίζεται σε μεγάλο βαθμό από την τύχη.
4. Σε γενικές γραμμές, οι άνθρωποι παίρνουν ό,τι τους αξίζει στη ζωή.
5. Οι ατυχίες των ανθρώπων είναι αποτέλεσμα λαθών.
6. Οι καλοί άνθρωποι θα έχουν και καλή τύχη στη ζωή.
7. Η ζωή είναι γεμάτη αβεβαιότητα επειδή καθορίζεται από την τύχη.
8. Σε γενικές γραμμές, οι καλοί άνθρωποι παίρνουν αυτό που τους αξίζει στη ζωή.
9. Με τις πράξεις μας μπορούμε να εμποδίσουμε κακά γεγονότα.
10. Αν οι άνθρωποι ήταν πιο προνοητικοί, οι περισσότερες ατυχίες δεν θα συνέβαιναν.
11. Η τύχη παίζει καθοριστικό ρόλο στη ζωή.
12. Όταν συμβαίνουν κακά πράγματα, είναι κυρίως επειδή οι άνθρωποι δεν προνόησαν να προστατέψουν τον εαυτό τους.

Single-Item Sense-Making Measure

Bereaved form: Προσπάθησα να κατανοήσω την απώλεια.

Non-bereaved form: Πιστεύω ότι χρειάζεται να βρεις νόημα στην απώλεια, όταν κάποιος αγαπημένος σου πεθαίνει.

Appendix D

Survey Instrument (Turkish)

Meaningfulness of the World subscale of The World Assumption Scale (Janoff-Bulman, 1989) Items – Translated Turkish Version

1. Talihsizliklerin iyi ve saygın kişilerin başına gelme ihtimali daha düşüktür.
2. Kötü olaylar insanlara rastgele olarak dağıtılır.
3. Hayatımızın seyri büyük oranda şans tarafından belirlenir.
4. İnsanlar genel olarak başlarına gelenleri hak ederler.
5. İnsanların başına gelen talihsizlikler, hatalarından kaynaklanır.
6. İnsanlar iyi oldukları takdirde iyi şansa sahip olurlar.
7. Hayat şans eseri başımıza gelen belirsizliklerle doludur.
8. Genel olarak, iyi insanlar hak ettikleri şeyleri elde ederler.
9. Yaptıklarımızla başımıza gelecek olan kötülükleri engelleyebiliriz.
10. Eğer insanlar bazı olayları önleyecek faaliyetlerde bulunurlarsa, talihsizlikler önlenebilir.
11. Hayat genellikle rastgele ilerler.
12. Kötü olayların gerçekleşmesi genellikle insanların onu önlemek için gereken eylemde bulunmamalarından kaynaklanır.

Single-Item Sense-Making Measure

Bereaved form: Bu kaybı anlamaya çalıştım.

Nonbereaved form: Sevdiğim kişiyi kaybettiğim zaman onun ölümünde anlam bulmanın gerekli olduğuna inanıyorum.

Appendix E

Survey Instrument (Dutch)

Meaningfulness of the World subscale of The World Assumption Scale (Janoff-Bulman, 1989) Items – Translated Dutch Version

1. Tegenslag overkomt waardige en fatsoenlijke mensen minder snel.
2. Slechte gebeurtenissen worden willekeurig verspreid over mensen.
3. De loop van ons leven wordt grotendeels vastgelegd door toevalligheden.
4. Over het algemeen krijgen mensen in deze wereld wat ze verdienen.
5. Tegenslagen zijn het resultaat van fouten.
6. Mensen zullen geluk ervaren wanneer ze zelf goed zijn.
7. Het leven zit te vol met onzekerheden die vastgelegd zijn door toeval.
8. Over het algemeen krijgen goede mensen wat ze verdienen in deze wereld.
9. Door ons handelen kunnen we slechte/erge gebeurtenissen voorkomen.
10. Als mensen voorzorgsmaatregelen zouden nemen, zouden de meeste tegenslagen voorkomen kunnen worden.
11. Over het algemeen is het leven voor het grootste gedeelte willekeurig.
12. Wanneer er erge dingen gebeuren, komt dat meestal doordat mensen niet voldoende actie hebben ondernomen om zichzelf te beschermen.

Single-Item Sense-Making Measure

Bereaved form: Ik probeer het verlies te begrijpen.

Non-bereaved form: Ik denk dat het nodig is om naar betekenis te zoeken in het verlies van een belangrijk persoon.

Appendix F

Survey Instrument (German)

Meaningfulness of the World subscale of The World Assumption Scale (Janoff-Bulman, 1989) Items – Translated German Version

1. Ehrenwerte, anständige Menschen haben weniger Pech.
2. Schlechte Ereignisse sind zufällig auf Menschen verteilt.
3. Unser Lauf des Lebens ist vom Zufall bestimmt.
4. Im Allgemeinen bekommen Menschen was sie verdienen in dieser Welt.
5. Das Pech von Menschen resultiert aus Fehlern.
6. Das Leben ist voller Unsicherheiten, die durch Zufall bestimmt werden.
7. Im Großen und Ganzen bekommen gute Menschen was sie verdienen in dieser Welt.
8. Wenn Menschen vorbeugende Maßnahmen ergreifen würden, könnte das meiste Pech verhindert werden.
9. Im Allgemeinen ist das Leben hauptsächlich vom Zufall bestimmt.
10. Wenn schlechte Dinge passieren, kommt es normalerweise dadurch, dass Menschen nicht die notwendigen Maßnahmen ergriffen haben um sich zu schützen.
11. Durch unsere Taten können wir verhindern, dass schlechte Dinge passieren.
12. Menschen erfahren Glück, wenn sie selbst auch gut sind.

Single-Item Sense-Making Measure

Bereaved form: Ich habe versucht einen Sinn im Tod zu finden.

Non-bereaved form: Ich glaube es ist notwendig, einen Sinn in dem Verlust einer mir wichtigen Person zu finden.

Appendix G

Survey Instrument (Serbian)

Meaningfulness of the World subscale of The World Assumption Scale (Janoff-Bulman, 1989) Items – Translated Serbian Version

1. Nesreća uglavnom zaobilazi dobre, vredne ljude.
2. Nesreća ne bira koga će da zadesi.
3. Tokovi naših života uglavnom su posledica pukih slučajnosti.
4. Na ovom svetu, ljudi uglavnom dobijaju ono što su i zaslužili.
5. Ljudska nesreća uzrokovana je ljudskim greškama.
6. Ako su ljudi dobri, i život će im biti takav.
7. Život je pun neizvesnosti, čiji ishod zavisi od puke slučajnosti.
8. Sve u svemu, dobri ljudi dobiju ono što su i zaslužili na ovom svetu.
9. Svojim delima možemo sprečiti da se loše stvari dese.
10. Kada bi ljudi preduzimali mere predostrožnosti, nesreća bi se uglavnom mogla zaobići.
11. Ukupno gledano, život je uglavnom zbir pukih slučajnosti.
12. Kada se loše stvari dese, to je uglavnom zato što ljudi nisu preduzeli ono što je potrebno da bi se od njih zaštitili.

Single-Item Sense-Making Measure

Bereaved form: Tražio/la sam smisao u gubitku drage osobe.

Non-bereaved form: Neophodno je naći smisao u smrti drage osobe.

Appendix H

Informed Consent

This form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your consent.

Purpose of the Study. You have been asked to participate in a research study about grief experiences across cultures. The purpose of this study is to enhance understanding about grief.

What will you be asked to do? If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to Respond to questionnaires regarding your experience with grief. This study will take approximately 20 minutes.

What are the risks involved in this study? The possible risk associated with this study are minimal. Risks associated with this study are emotional discomfort.

What are the possible benefits of this study? You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, by participating in this study you are contributing to further knowledge regarding the experience of a loss of an important person and findings from this study may lead to a better understanding regarding this experience.

Participation or Withdrawal. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to answer any question by skipping them and you have the right to withdraw from participation at any time. If you do not want to participate either simply stop participating or close the browser window. If you would like to participate continue reading and click next once you have finished.

Will there be any compensation? There is no financial compensation for participation in this study.

How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected if you participate in this research study? Limiting personal identifying information, including your name, will ensure your privacy and confidentiality. The information you provide will only be shared with researcher involved in the project. Your responses are anonymous, and the results of the study will never be traceable to the information you provide.

Whom to contact with questions about the study? If you have any questions about the study or if you feel that you have been harmed, contact the principal researcher, Henk Schut Ph.D. by sending an email to h.schut@uu.nl. Dr. Henk Schut is in the Department of Clinical Psychology at Utrecht University and has over 20 years of experience in research. Together with Dr. Margaret Stroebe, he developed the 'Dual process model of coping with bereavement'. He has also written several books and articles on grief. University page: <https://www.uu.nl/staff/hschut/0>

Participation. If you agree to participate, please select that choice and click next to begin.