



A Quest for Meaning: The Relationship Between Death, Quest Religiosity, and Well-being

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Abstract

Terror management theory suggests that when mortality concerns are salient, religion can serve as a defense in an attempt to boost self-esteem and shield against the potential for anxiety. Interestingly, however, very little research has been conducted among individuals who actively question their religious beliefs in order to attain a better understanding (i.e., quest religiosity). Recent research suggests that quest religiosity moderates the effects of mortality salience in that participants who were high in quest experienced lower self-esteem following reminders of death. Building on these findings, the current studies examined the connection between quest religiosity, mortality-related concerns, and meaning in life. Study 1 found that individuals who were high in quest experienced a heightened accessibility of death-related thoughts. Study 2 demonstrated that a greater fear of death was associated with a higher likelihood of questioning one's religious beliefs. Heightened feelings of quest religiosity, in turn, led to lower ratings of meaning in life. These results add to the existing body of literature suggesting that thoughts of death can serve to decrease well-being, but that this effect is influenced by individual differences, namely trait quest religiosity.

Method

Participants were blind to the true purpose of each experiment. Each construct of interest was embedded within a larger study of neutral questionnaires (e.g., attachment, attitudes toward groups, etc.). Given prior research (Arrowood et al., in press; Galen, 2015), non-religious individuals were removed from all analyses.

Study 1: 167 participants (140 = female, 27 = male; $M_{AGE} = 19.16$, $SD = 2.99$) the majority of which were White/Caucasian (82%) completed the following measures:

- The Quest Religiosity Scale (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991). This questionnaire measures the extent to which individuals actively question their religious beliefs as part of their spiritual identification (e.g., "It might be said that I value my religious doubts and uncertainties"). The scale showed high reliability ($\alpha = .84$).
- Death-thought Accessibility (Greenberg et al., 1994). The death word stem completion task measures the accessibility of mortality-related thoughts. Individuals were shown 25 word stems, where 6 target items could be completed with either death or neutral related words (e.g., "BUR __ D, DE __, GRA __, KI __ ED, SK __ L, & COFF __").

Method (Cont.)

Study 2: 712 participants (566 = female, 145 = male, 1 = did not respond; $M_{AGE} = 19.06$, $SD = 2.13$) the majority of which were White/Caucasian (78.1%) completed the following measures:

- Fear of death. A single item measured individuals' fear of death (i.e., "I am bothered by the thought of my mortality").
- The Quest Religiosity Scale (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991). The quest scale demonstrated sufficient reliability ($\alpha = .82$) in Study 2.
- The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Kaler, & Oishi, 2006). The meaning in life scale assessed the presence of meaning in participants' lives (e.g., "My life has a clear sense of purpose"). Reliability was high ($\alpha = .88$).

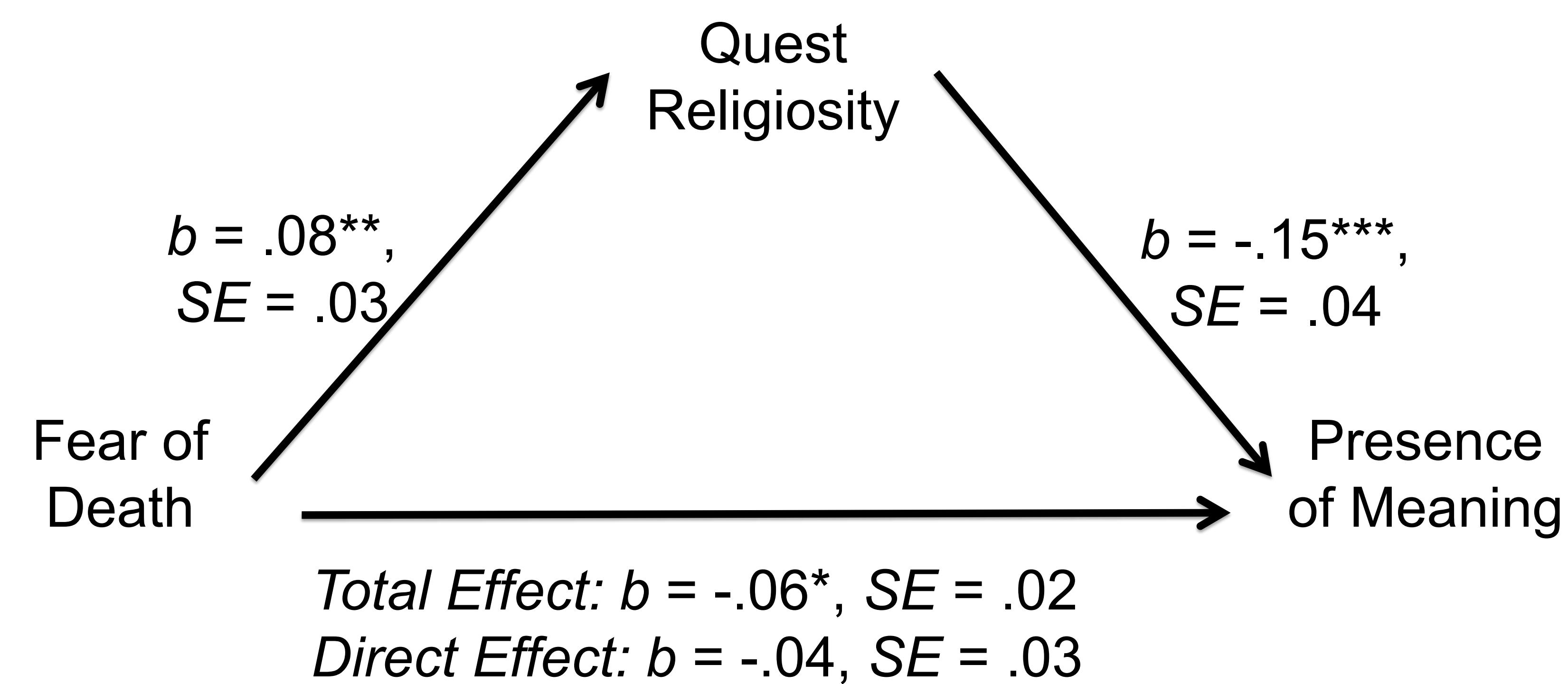
Results

Study 1:

A correlation analysis found a significant, positive relationship between quest religiosity and death thought accessibility, $r = .15$, $p = .05$.

Study 2:

Following the steps outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986), a mediation model found that a high fear of death led to greater quest religiosity which, in turn, decreased presence of meaning. Quest religiosity fully mediated the relationship between fear of death and presence of meaning.



* < .05
** < .01
*** < .001

Discussion

- The present research examined the relationship quest religiosity, thoughts of mortality, and psychological well-being. The results of Study 1 found that individuals who are high in quest religiosity experience a heightened accessibility of death-related thoughts. Study 2, in turn, demonstrated that people exhibit a decline in meaning in life to the extent that mortality concerns are associated with greater quest religiosity.
- Given that high quest persons actively question their religious beliefs, these individuals are unable to use their religious values as a defense to suppress death-related thoughts. This suggests compromised anxiety-buffering defense mechanisms (e.g., self-esteem, cultural worldviews) resulting in greater mortality awareness. These compromised defenses can explain the results of Study 2 and other empirical work (see Arrowood et al., in press) demonstrating declines in well-being.
- The results of Study 2 also suggest that greater fear of death leads individuals to be more quest oriented because their beliefs are not providing existential security. Thus, these individuals' doubts in the promise of an afterlife afforded by religion have the potential to lead to ineffective anxiety buffers. From this perspective, individual differences in quest religiosity are associated with existential concerns that are not resolved.

Description

According to terror management theory, we are motivated to deny our death by using either cultural belongingness or religious belief. This effectively shields our well-being. Some religious individuals, however, question their beliefs. These quest individuals may not benefit from the same shielding as someone who firmly believes in their religion. The current studies found that those who question experience more death thoughts. Further, a greater fear of death was associated with lower well-being, but this relationship was influenced by individuals' quest beliefs. Thus, religious belief can only serve as a shield if this belief is absolute and unwavering.

