

# An Existential Quest for Meaning: An Analysis of the Function of Religious Doubts Following Mortality Salience

Robert B. Arrowood, Jill Hoffman, Maddie Weinstock, Caroline Angell, Cathy R. Cox

Texas Christian University



## Abstract

Terror Management Theory suggests that individuals rely on worldview defenses to contend with mortality concerns. Similarly, religious individuals bolster their specific beliefs in order to defend against the awareness of death. Five studies examined the intersection between quest religiosity (e.g., individuals whose religious worldviews are to doubt and question), worldview defense, and existential anxieties. We hypothesized that quest individuals have weakened religious beliefs causing greater death thought accessibility. Additionally, quest individuals should display heightened secular worldview striving following mortality salience and less certainty in their own religiosity.

## Study 1

Given prior research (Arrowood et al., 2018; Galen, 2015), non-religious individuals were removed from all analyses. Reliability was high for all scales (i.e., Cronbach's  $\alpha > .75$ )

### Method:

167 participants (140 = female;  $M_{AGE} = 19.16$ ) were exposed to:

- **A measure of Quest religiosity** (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991). This assesses doubt as a part of spiritual identification.
- **Death-thought Accessibility (DTA)** (Greenberg et al., 1994). 25 word stems, where 6 target items could be completed with either death or neutral related words (e.g., BUR \_\_ D).

### Results:

A significant, positive relationship between quest religiosity and DTA emerged,  $r = .15, p = .05$ .

## Study 2

### Method:

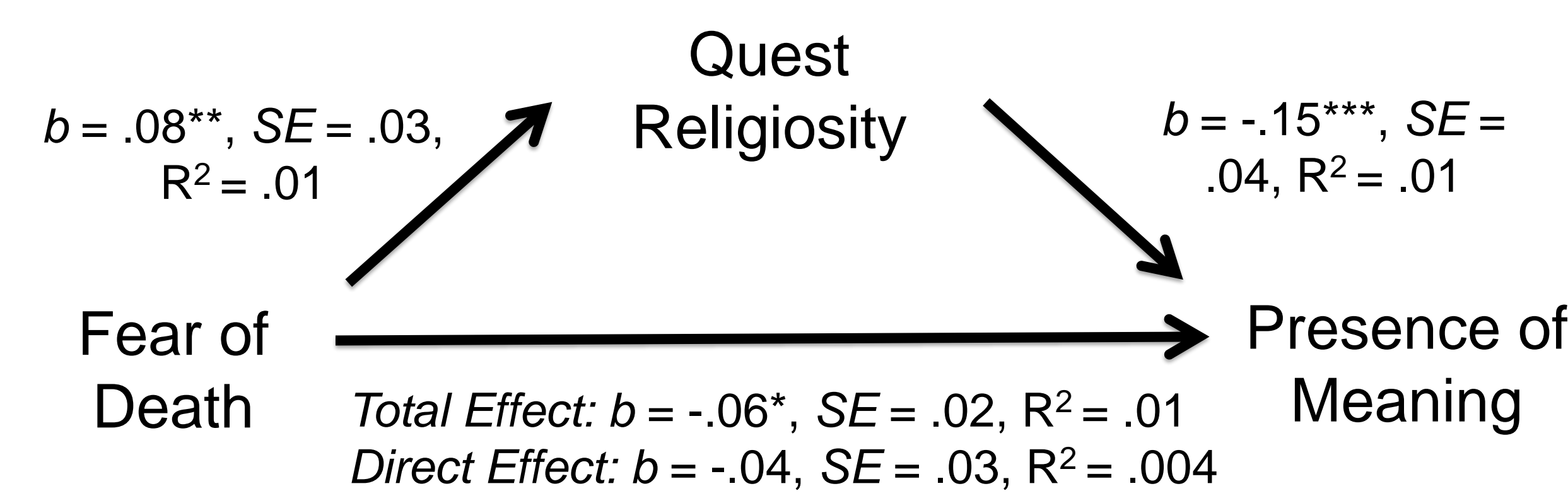
712 participants (565 = female;  $M_{AGE} = 19.06$ ) completed:

- **Fear of death.** A single item measured individuals' fear of death.
- **Quest religiosity.**
- **Meaning in Life questionnaire** (Steger et al., 2006). Assessed the presence of meaning in participants' lives.

### Results:

High fear of death predicted greater quest religiosity. This, in turn, decreased presence of meaning, *indirect effect*  $CI = -.017, -.001$ .

## Study 2 cont.



## Study 3

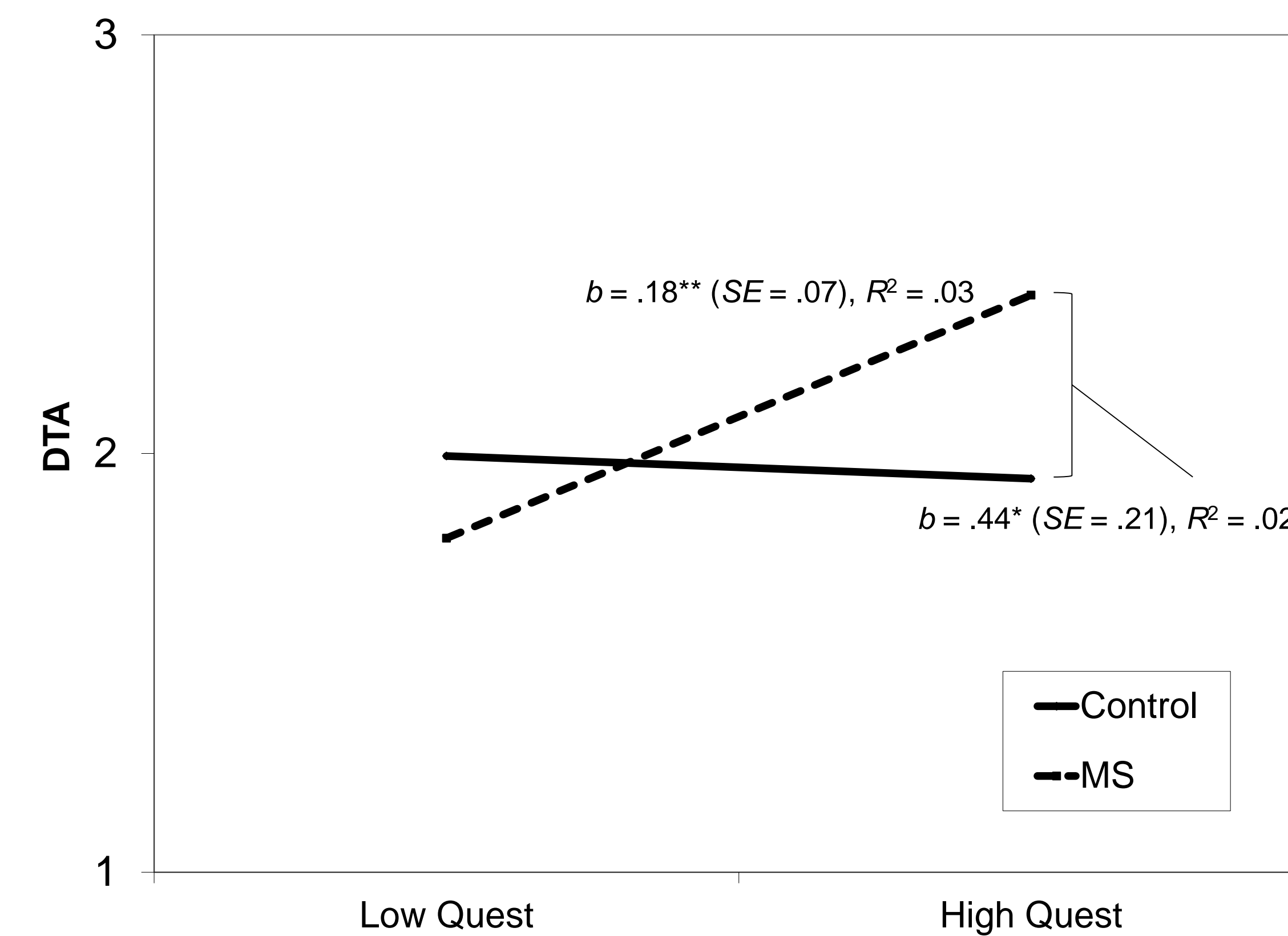
### Method:

101 participants (127= female;  $M_{AGE} = 38.03$ ) completed:

- **Mortality salience manipulation** (MS; Landau et al., 2011). Death related vs neutral word search.
- **DTA.**
- **Quest religiosity.**

### Results

A significant interaction between quest and MS on DTA emerged,  $b = .20 (SE = .09), t = 2.15, p = .03, R^2 = .02$ .



## Study 4

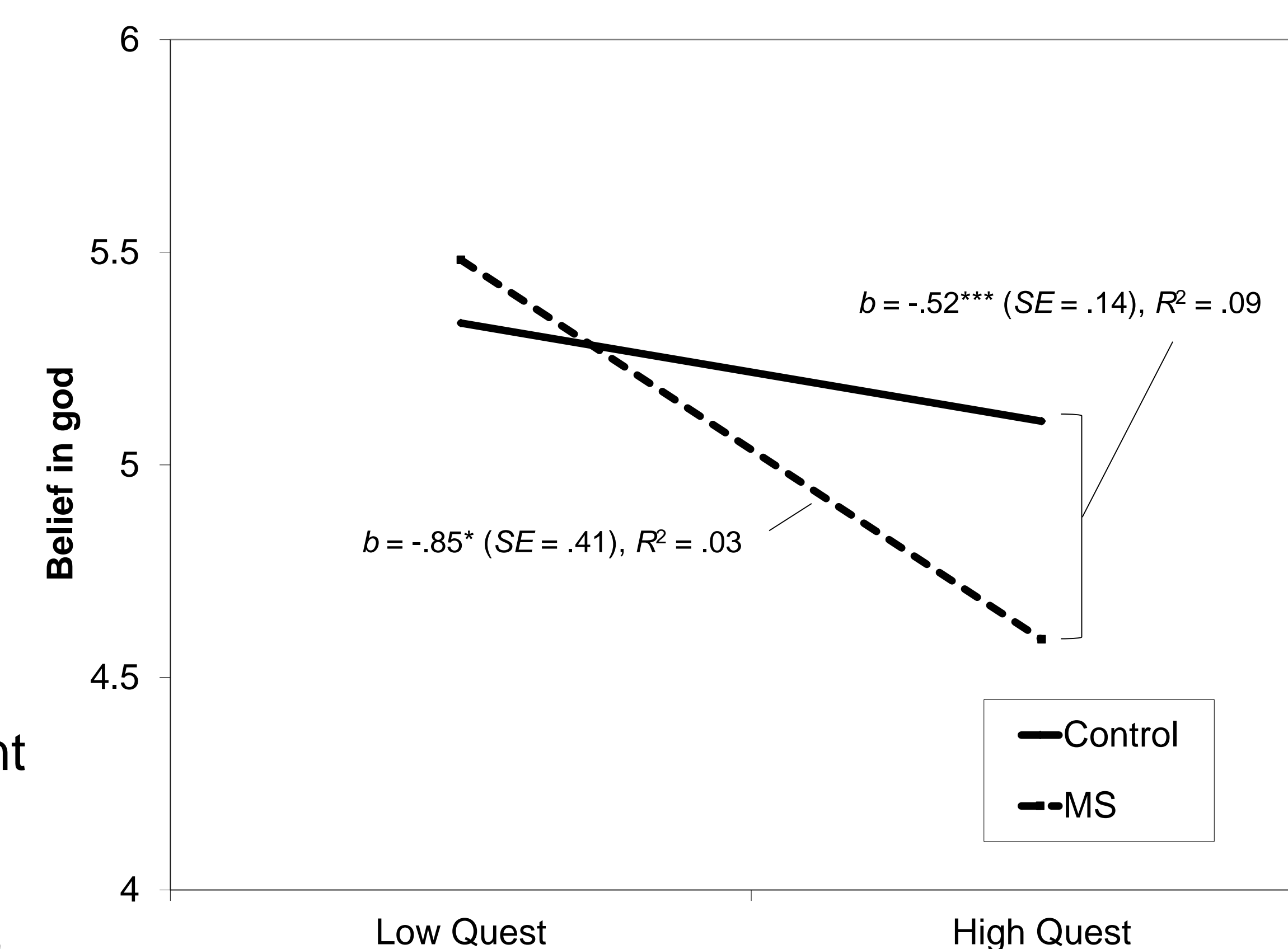
### Method:

176 participants (104= female;  $M_{AGE} = 39.37$ ) were exposed to:

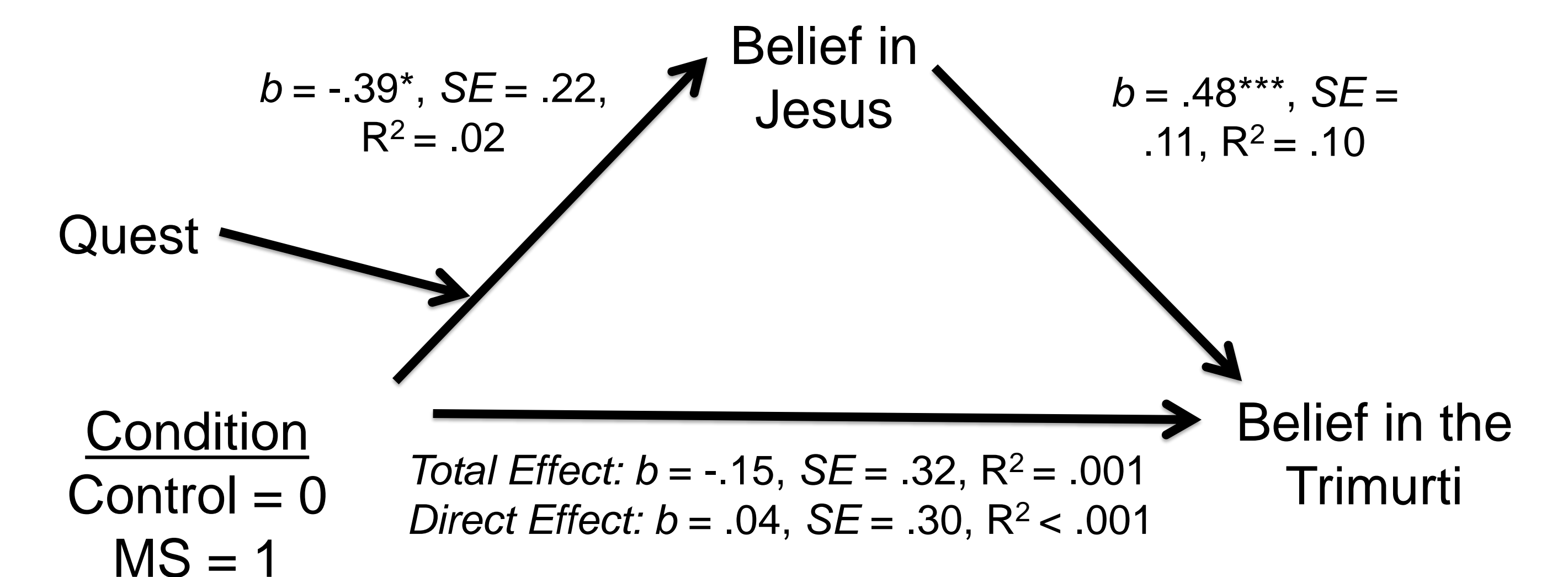
- **Mortality salience manipulation.**
- **Certainty in God and the Trimurti** (Vail et al., 2012). Participants certainty in the existence of Jesus and the Trimurti.
- **Quest religiosity.**

### Results:

A conditional process model found a significant interaction between high levels of quest and MS predicting lower belief in god which then predicted belief in the Trimurti, *95% C.I. of the indirect effect* =  $-.54, -.01$ .



## Study 4 cont.



## Study 5

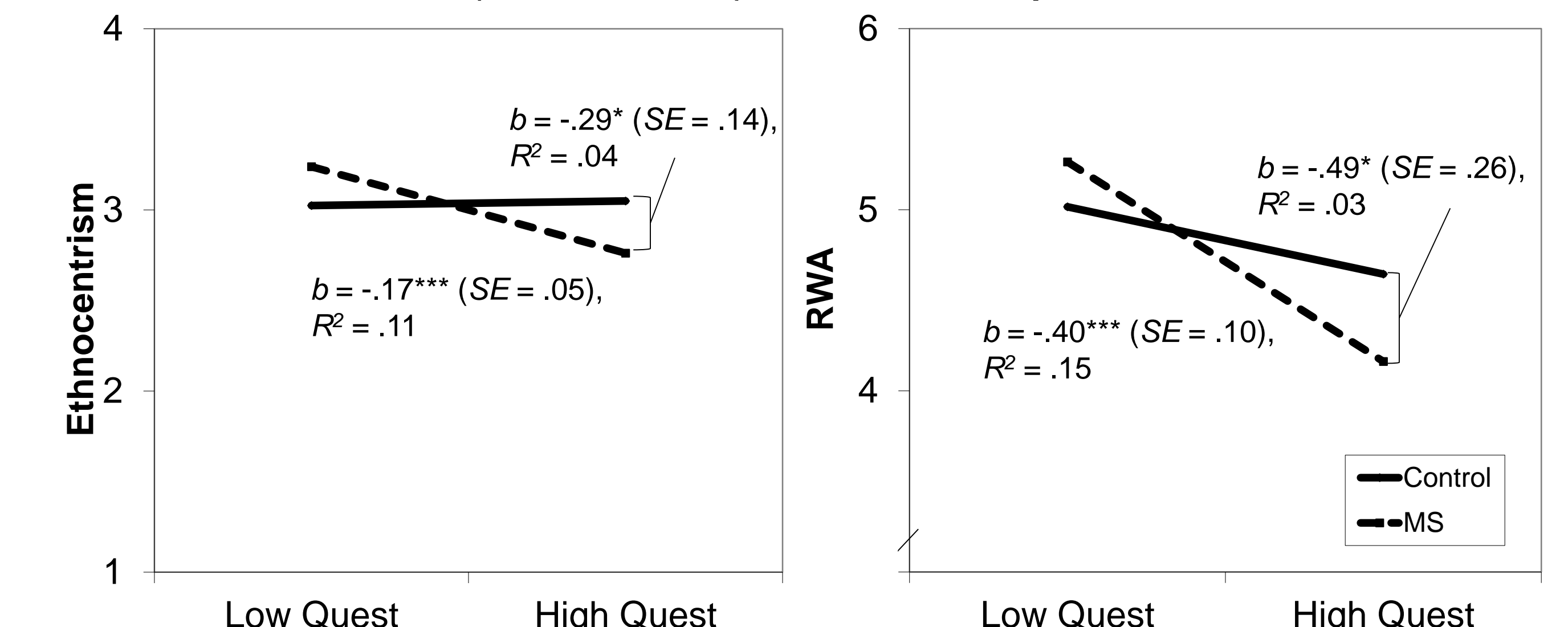
### Method:

101 participants (79 = female, 22 = male;  $M_{AGE} = 19.16$ ) completed:

- **Mortality salience manipulation.**
- **Worldview defense.** US Ethnocentrism Scale (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997); Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA; Zakrisson, 2005) to measure defensiveness.
- **Quest religiosity.**

### Results:

Interactions between quest and MS on ethnocentrism and RWA was found,  $b$ 's  $\geq -.26 (SE$ 's  $< .14), t$ 's  $\geq 1.91, p$ 's  $\leq .06, R^2$ 's  $\geq .03$ .



## Conclusion

Although high quest persons identify as religious, they are unable to fully utilize their belief as a form of worldview defense. Thus, quest persons experience greater DTA as a result of weakened anxiety buffers. Further, priming mortality salience leads to a highly increased death-related thoughts and a weaker relationship with God. Finally, to compensate, quest persons bolster secular defenses to contend with existential anxieties.