

The Moderation of Terror Management Effects in Broad Autism Phenotype (BAP) Individuals

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Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by problems with social-emotional reciprocity, repetitive patterns of behavior or strict routine, and the development of symptoms early in childhood that limit everyday functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The Broad Autism Phenotype (BAP; Hurley, Losh, Parlier, Reznick, & Piven, 2007) describes individuals who show characteristics similar to those with autism spectrum disorder. For example, BAP individuals show aloof personality (e.g., a lack of interest in social interaction), rigid personality (e.g., little interest in change or difficulty with change) and pragmatic language problems (e.g., inability to engage in fluid, reciprocal conversation).

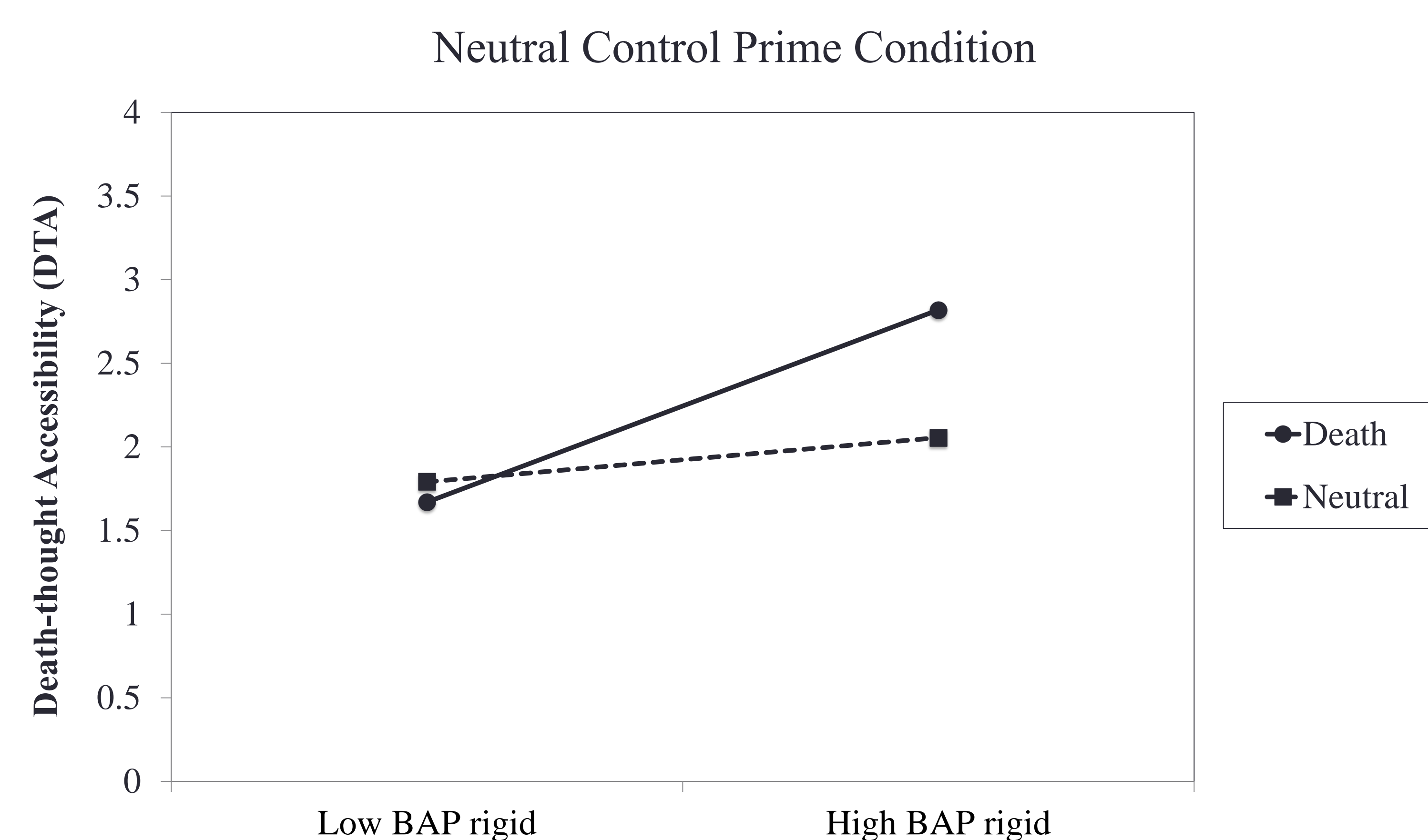
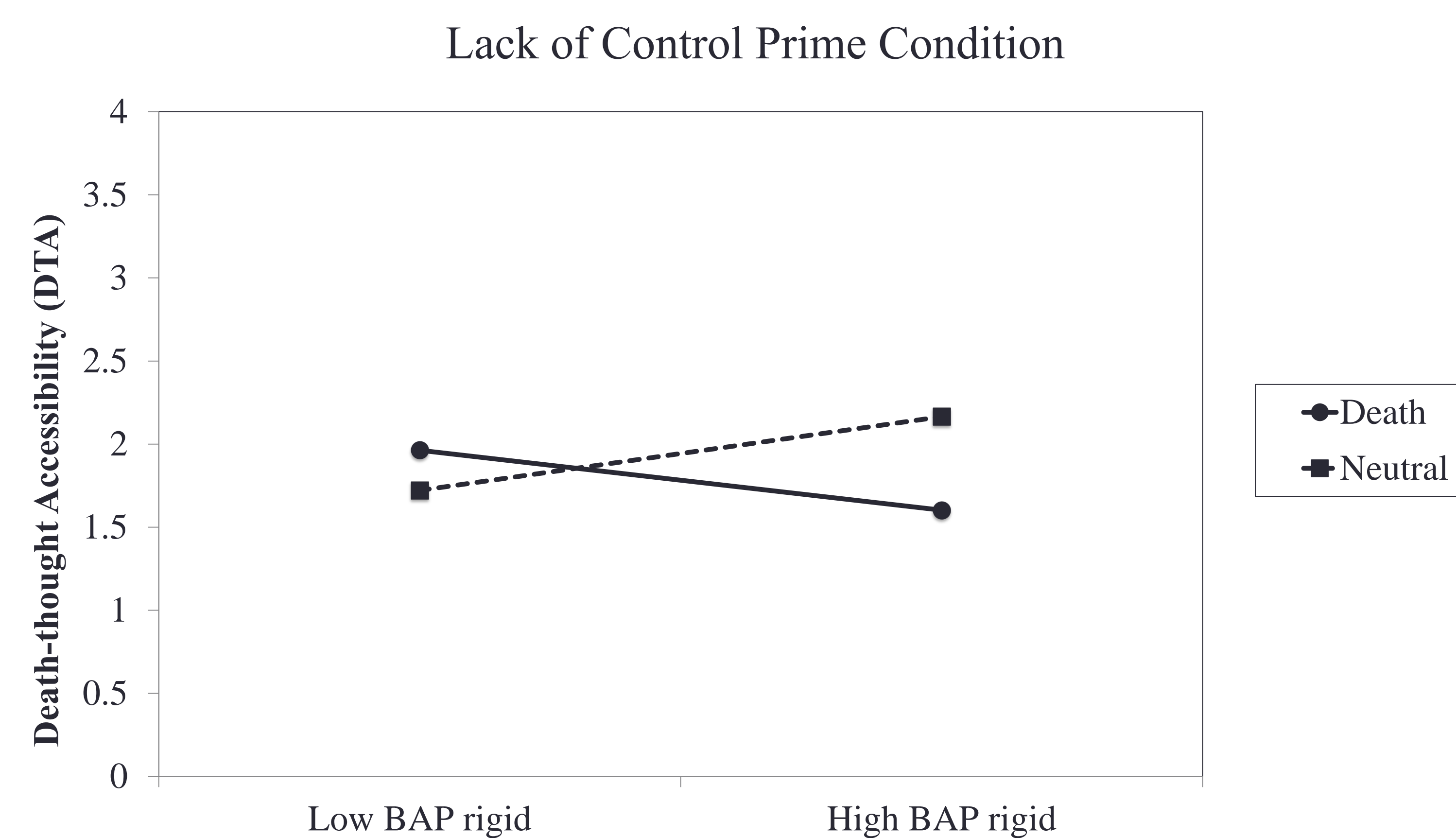
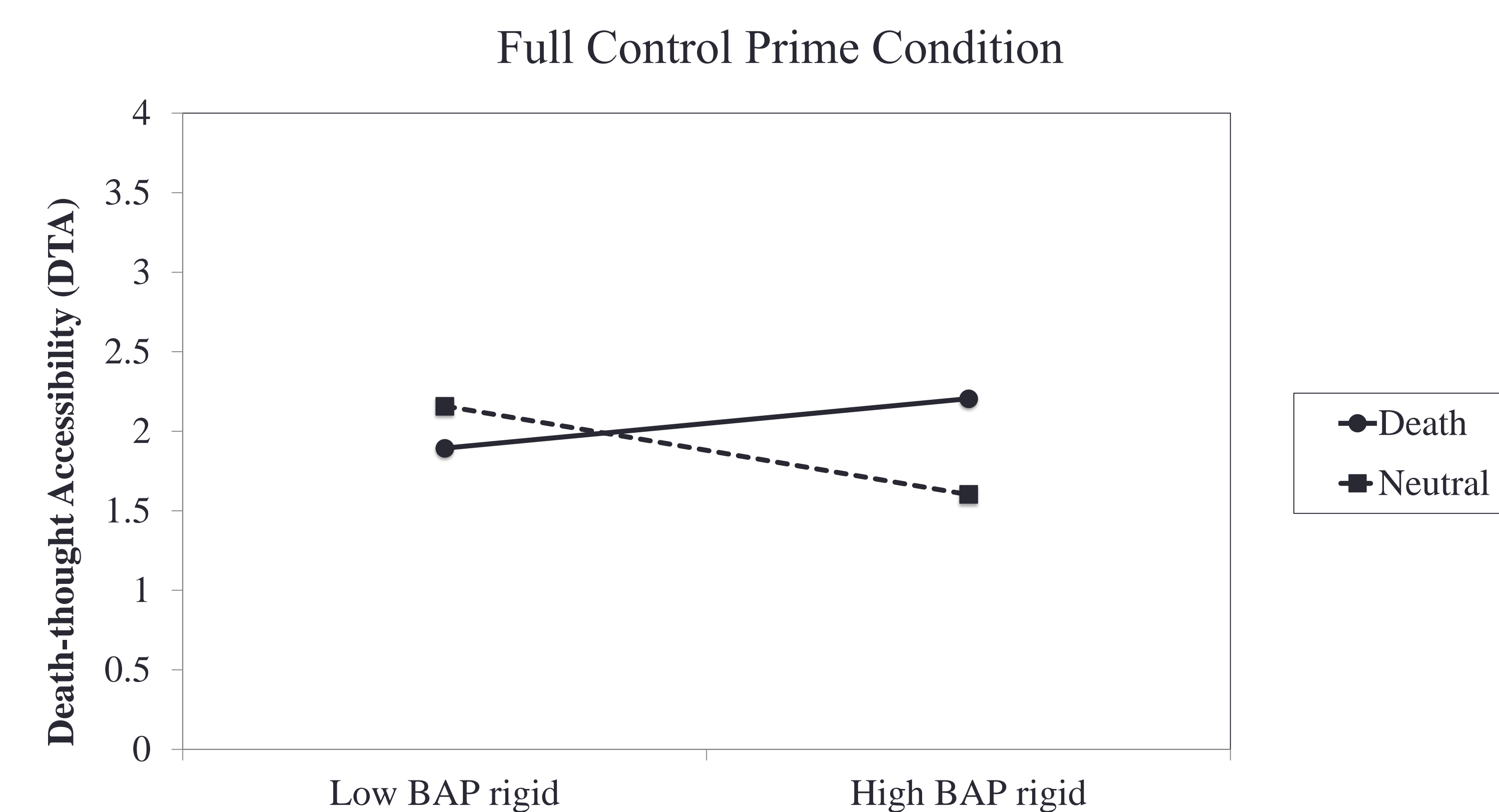
According to terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) people are motivated to mitigate the potential for anxiety inherent in the awareness of death so that these concerns do not bloom into debilitating terror. Individuals may do so through the use of three psychological defense mechanisms that together create an anxiety-buffering system: (a) cultural worldviews, (b) self-esteem, and (c) close relationships. Additionally, individuals show a greater accessibility of death-related thoughts following disruptions to their anxiety-buffering defense system (i.e., the DTA hypothesis; Hayes, Schimel, Arndt, & Faucher, 2010).

Prior research has shown that individuals high in BAP rigidity demonstrate heightened death concerns and greater defensiveness following a mortality salience (MS) manipulation (Arrowood, Cox, & Ekas, 2016). Following this line of work, the current research aimed to examine the moderating effects of a sense of control on death-thought accessibility (DTA) in BAP individuals.

Method

Participants were first asked to complete the BAPQ (Hurley et al., 2007) to assess the traits of aloofness, rigidity, and pragmatic language problems. Following previous research (e.g., Landau et al., 2011; Maxfield et al., 2007; Schimel, Greenberg, & Martens, 2003), participants completed a word search puzzle as the mortality salience (MS) manipulation. Specifically, in the death condition, seven death-related words (i.e., death, dead, decay, die, funeral, burial, & corpse) were embedded as they searched for neutral target words. Then, participants were randomly assigned to a control-prime writing task (i.e., full control, no control, vs. neutral). Finally, all participants completed the word-fragment completion task to measure DTA (Greenberg et al., 1986). The task presented 25 word fragments, 6 of which could be completed with a neutral or death-related word (e.g., COFF_ _ could be completed as either COFFIN or COFFEE), and DTA score was calculated as the total number of death-related word completions.

Results



Discussion

Hypothesis 1. It was predicted that high BAP rigid individuals would show elevated DTA compared to low BAP rigid individuals following an MS prime. The hypothesis was partially supported, as simple slope tests were only significant in the neutral control condition. Specifically, high BAP rigid individuals showed greater DTA in the MS condition compared to low BAP rigid individuals following the neutral control prime. Although high BAP rigid individuals in the full control condition showed greater DTA following MS compared to low BAP individuals, the simple slope test was not statistically significant. Interestingly, although not statistically significant, high BAP rigid individuals in the lack of control condition showed less DTA following MS compared to low BAP rigid individuals.

Hypothesis 2. It was predicted that low BAP rigid individuals would not show differences in DTA when comparing the MS and neutral conditions. This hypothesis was fully supported, as regions of significance tests revealed that low BAP rigid individuals did not differ on DTA between MS and neutral conditions following any of the control primes.

Hypothesis 3. It was predicted that following the MS manipulation, high BAP rigid individuals would show lower DTA in the full control condition compared to high BAP rigid individuals in the neutral and lack of control prime conditions. This hypothesis was partially supported, as high BAP rigid individuals in the full control condition showed significantly lower DTA compared to high BAP rigid individuals in the neutral control condition. Surprisingly, high BAP rigid individuals showed significantly lower DTA following MS in the lack of control condition compared to the neutral control condition. Although not statistically significant, a similar trend emerged when comparing the lack of control to the full control condition.

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