

# Mind-body dualism buffers existential concerns

## BACKGROUND

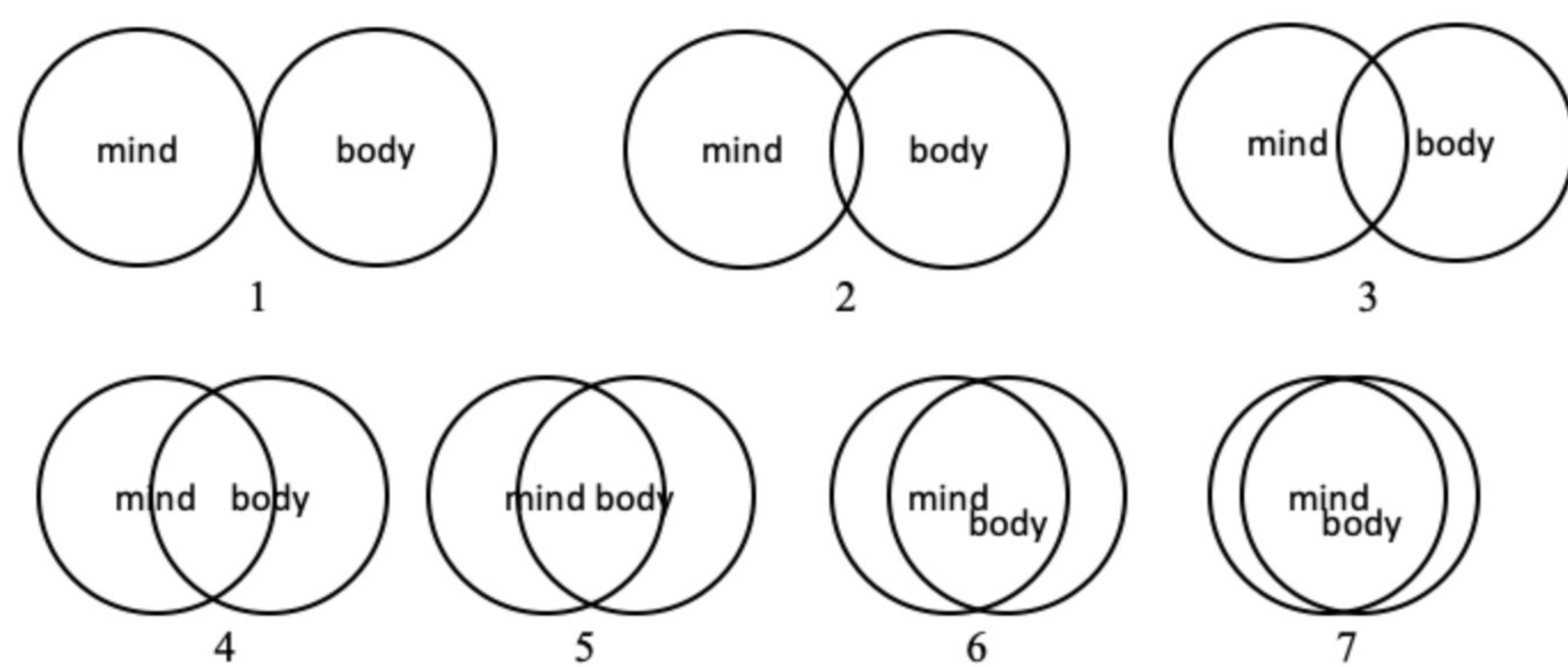
Terror management theory suggests that the physical body can create an existential threat by reminding people of their mortal nature. Mind-body dualism, the belief that the mind and the body are separate, might affect people's mortality concerns. Given that the body is threatening given its vulnerability to death, individuals who perceive the mind and body as being connected (vs. separate) should experience higher mortality-related thoughts.

## METHOD

309 participants recruited from MTurk (64% female; 83% Caucasian;  $M_{AGE} = 42.46$ ;  $SD_{AGE} = 13.57$ ) completed:

### Individual differences scales:

- Trait Dualism scale (Stanovich, 1989; 3 items; e.g., "Minds are in principle independent of bodies, to which they are only temporarily attached")
- Mind-body Overlap measure (Aron et al., 1992; 1 item with 7 diagrams representing different degree of mind-body dualism)



### Manipulations

- Creatureliness prime (Goldenberg et al., 2001; creatureliness essay indicating human-animal similarity vs. human uniqueness essay indicating humans are different from animals)
- Dualism vs. Physicalism prime (Forstmann et al., 2012; dualism essay vs. physicalism essay)

### Dependent Variable

- Death-thought accessibility (DTA) word-stem completion task (Greenberg et al., 1994; 28-word fragments (e.g., GRA\_) that can be filled out with a death-related word (e.g., GRAVE) or neutral word (e.g., GRASS))

People who believe that they have a mind that's separate from the body have less concerns about death, whereas people who believe that the mind and the body are the same are more likely to have death related thoughts when they think about how the body is just an animal.



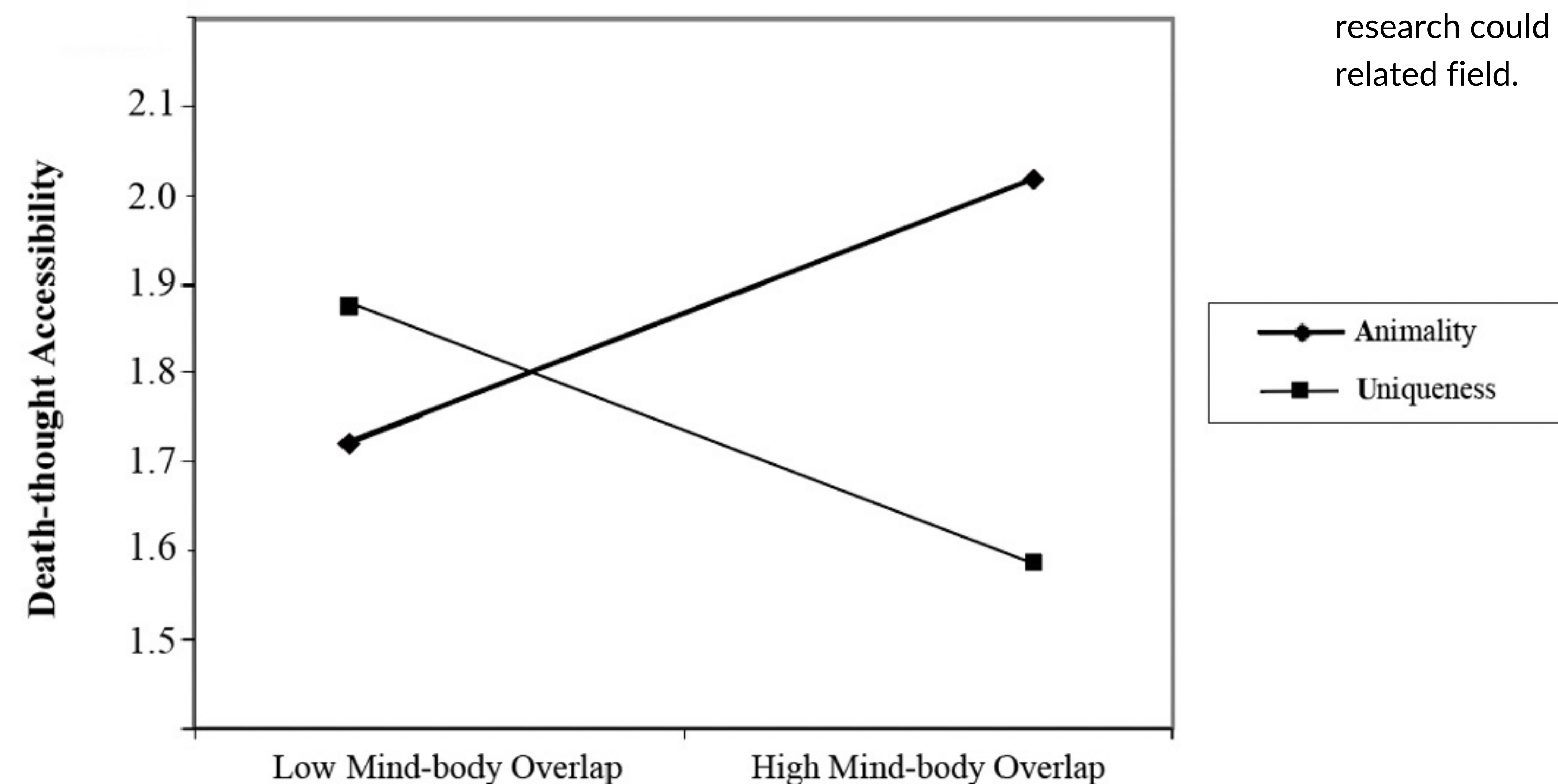
## RESULTS

- Significant main effect for dualism prime, with dualism condition having higher DTA than physicalism condition ( $F(1, 12) = 3.87, p = .050, \eta^2_p = .013$ ).
- Marginal main effect for creatureliness prime, with human-animal similarity condition having higher DTA than human uniqueness condition ( $F(1, 12) = 3.67, p = .056, \eta^2_p = .012$ ).
- No significant 2-way ANOVA interaction examining the interaction between the creatureliness prime and the dualism prime on DTA scores ( $F(1, 12) = .87, p = .351, \eta^2_p = .003$ ).
- Significant 2-way moderated regression between creaturely prime and mind-body overlap measure on DTA (see Figure 1.) ( $b = .16 (SE = .06), t = 2.65, p = .008, R^2 = .023$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Individuals who perceived the mind and the body as separate entities were protected from the existential threat of human animality, while those who perceived the mind as more overlapping with the body experienced heightened death concerns after they read the essay emphasizing how human beings were no more than animals. Given that mind-body dualists tend to be less concerned about death, they might make health and lifestyle choices accordingly (e.g., exercise, diet). Future research could examine the implication in the health-related field.

Figure 1. 2-way interaction between Creatureliness Essay and Mind-body Overlap Measure



Jieming Xiao  
Cathy R. Cox

