

# Existential Isolation and Social Exclusion: An Experimental Comparison

Matthew Espinosa, Cathy R. Cox  
Texas Christian University  
Contact: [m.espinosa@tcu.edu](mailto:m.espinosa@tcu.edu)



## INTRODUCTION

- Social Exclusion → perceiving that you are being ignored by another individual or group of individuals (external).<sup>1</sup>
- Existential Isolation → perceiving that no one around you understands or shares your experiences (internal).<sup>2</sup>
  - Both forms of isolation have been individually linked to negative wellbeing outcomes, including increased loneliness, depression and anxiety symptoms, and threatened fundamental social needs for belonging, self-esteem, meaningful existence, and control.<sup>1,2,3</sup>
- But, no research to date has examined how these forms of isolation differ or overlap in these outcomes.

## STUDY AIMS

1. Examine the differences, and similarities, in existential isolation and social exclusion outcomes for fundamental social needs.

## METHOD (Survey Studies)

### Participants

- Study 1: 186 MTurk adults (92 Men, 94 Women)
  - Mean age = 35.90 years ( $SD = 6.57$ )
- Study 2: 117 TCU Undergrads (7 Men, 110 Women)
  - Mean age = 19.75 years ( $SD = 1.25$ )

### Design (online studies)

- **Study 1 (Between-Subjects)**
  - Participants randomly assigned to write about their morning routine (neutral control), existential isolation, or social exclusion.
- **Study 2 (2-timpoints; Within-Subjects)**
  - Time 1 → Time 2 (3-weeks in-between)
  - ½ of participants respond to existential isolation prompt at Time 1, then exclusion at Time 2.
  - ½ of participants respond to social exclusion prompt at Time 1, then existential isolation at Time 2.

### Outcome Measures

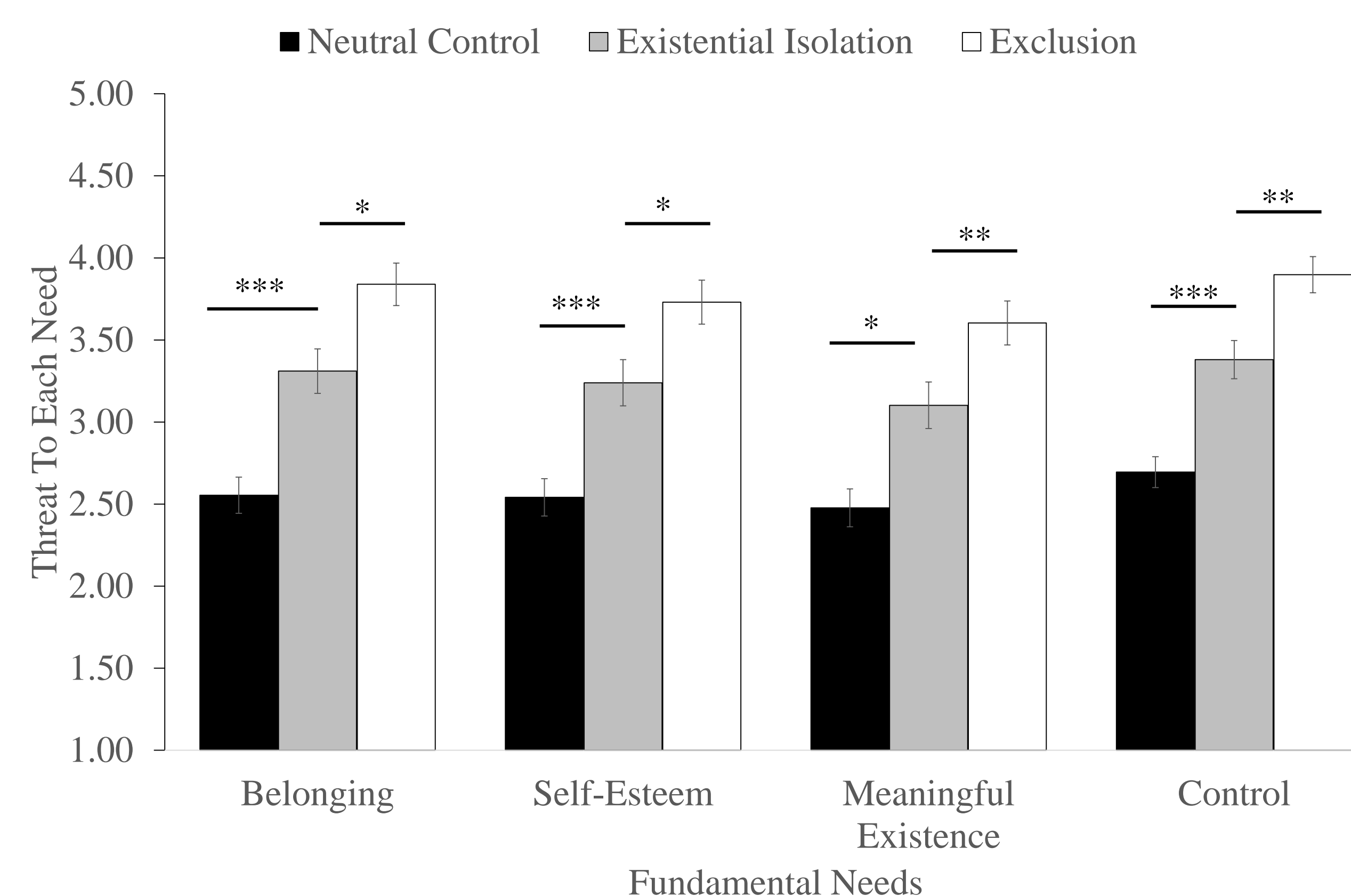
1. Fundamental Social Need Threat<sup>1</sup>
  - Belonging
    - "I felt like an outsider"
  - Self-Esteem
    - "I felt insecure"
  - Meaningful Existence
    - "I felt invisible"
  - Control
    - "I felt I was unable to influence the actions of others"

## METHOD (writing prompts)

- Neutral Control
  - "Think about your daily morning routine..."
- Existential Isolation
  - "Think about a situation in which you felt disconnected from others – a time when no one understood how you saw things or how you were feeling..."
- Social Exclusion
  - "Think about a situation in which you felt rejected or excluded in some way by another individual..."

## RESULTS – Study 1

\*\*\* $p < .001$   
\*\* $p < .01$   
\* $p < .05$



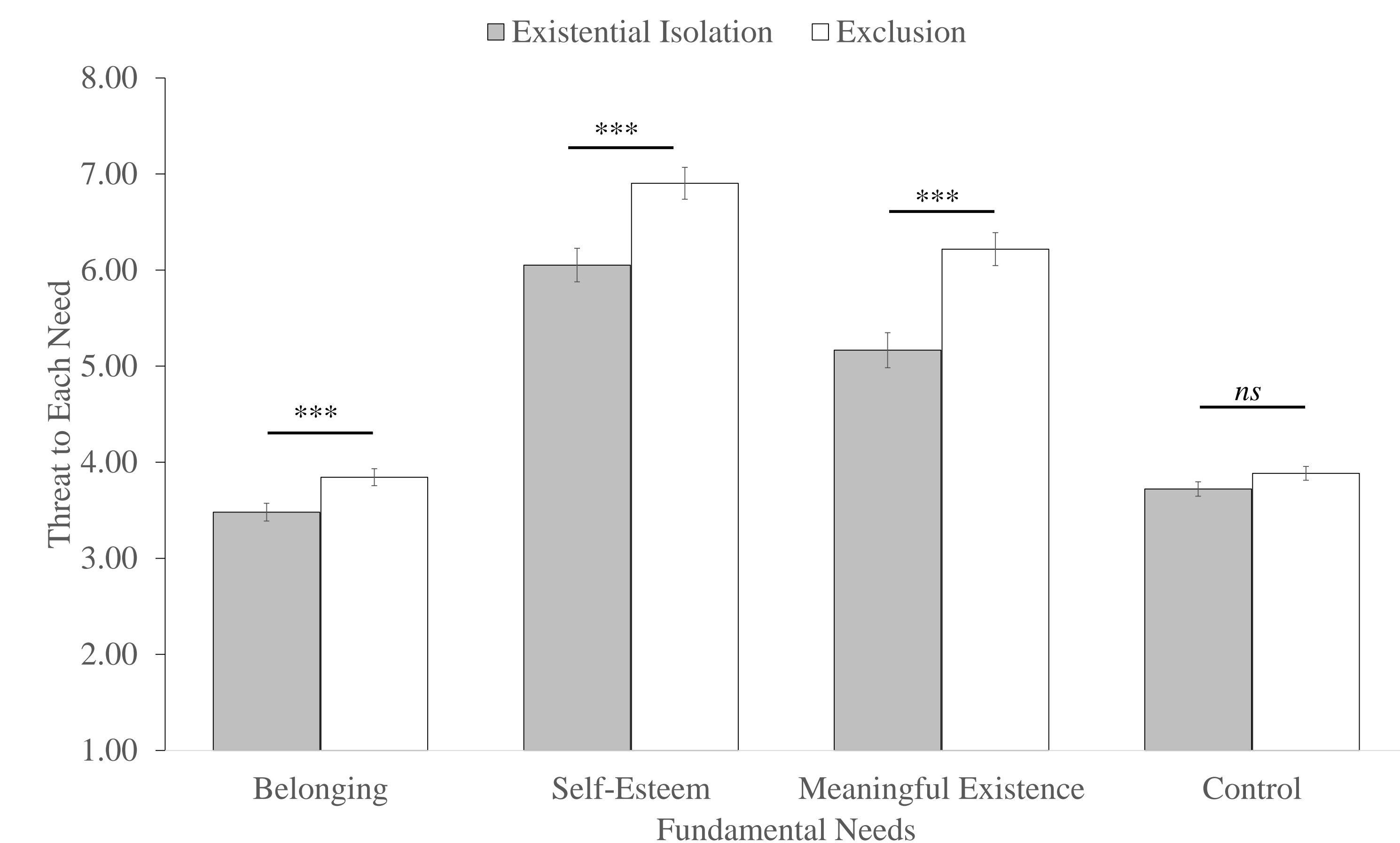
- Participants who recalled existential isolation reported more threat to each of their fundamental needs than those in the neutral control condition.
- Participants who recalled social exclusion reported even greater threat to their fundamental needs than participants who recalled existential isolation.
- Between-subjects design → do these experiences impact the same person in the same way?

## REFERENCES

1. Williams, K. D. (2009). Chapter 6 Ostracism: A Temporal Need-Threat Model. In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 41, pp. 275–314). Academic Press. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)00406-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)00406-1)
2. Pinel, E. C., Long, A. E., Murdoch, E. Q., & Helm, P. (2017). A prisoner of one's own mind: Identifying and understanding existential isolation. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 105, 54–63. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.09.024>
3. Constantino, M. J., Sommer, R. K., Goodwin, B. J., Coyne, A. E., & Pinel, E. C. (2019). Existential isolation as a correlate of clinical distress, beliefs about psychotherapy, and experiences with mental health treatment. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 29, 389–399. <https://doi.org/10.1037/int0000172>

## RESULTS – Study 2

\*\*\* $p < .001$   
\*\* $p < .01$   
\* $p < .05$



- Results largely replicated the pattern found in Study 1
  - Participants reported greater threat to their fundamental social needs, other than control, when they recalled social exclusion compared to when they recalled existential isolation.
  - No interactions with prompt order,  $ps > .110$ , suggesting that which prompt they completed first, did not influence these results.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Summary

- The present results provide initial evidence suggesting that experiences of existential isolation and social exclusion both threaten our fundamental social needs, though social exclusion seems to present a more severe threat to these needs.

### Limitations

- Isolation narratives are self-reported → do actual in-person experiences elicit different outcomes?
- Outcomes limited to cognitive reactions → what does this mean for behavior and future social interactions?

### Future Directions

- Examine social exclusion and existential isolation narratives qualitatively (i.e., what specific things do people remember about or focus on during these experiences?)
- Explore other cognitive and behavioral outcomes (do people behaviorally react differently to these experiences?)