

# The Existential Function of Apocalyptic Beliefs

Samuel W. Kaslon, Andrew A. Abeyta, Rutgers University-Camden  
Clay Routledge, North Dakota State University

## Introduction

- Meaning in life is an important component of psychological health and well being (E.g. Park, 2011; Routledge, & Juhl, 2010; Steger, Mann, Michels, & Cooper, 2009).
- People satisfy the need for meaning by investing in culturally derived beliefs and practices (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986)
- Beliefs about the apocalypse or end of the world are universal and have persisted throughout human history in part because they too help people satisfy the need for meaning especially among those who do not have secure meaning or who are otherwise dissatisfied with the conditions of their lives (Wojcik, 1997) .

**Hypothesis 1:** Meaning threat, relative to meaning bolster, will increase belief in the impending apocalypse among people low, but not high, in presence of meaning.

**Hypothesis 2:** Meaning threat, relative to control, will increase doomsday-prepping beliefs among people high in cynicism, but decrease doomsday-prepping beliefs among people low in cynicism.

## Study 1: Method

### Participants

- 141 undergraduate students (73 females;  $M_{age} = 19.5$ ,  $SD_{age} = 2.89$ )

### Procedure and Materials

- **Presence of Meaning:** 5-item presence of meaning subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). E.g., “I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful”. (1 = *absolutely untrue*, 7 = *absolutely true*;  $\alpha = .90$ ;  $M = 5.15$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ )
- **Belief in the Apocalypse:** 4-item response to apocalyptic article (Routledge, Abeyta, & Roynance, 2018). E.g., “The passage makes me think that witnessing a world-ending event during my lifetime is a realistic possibility” (1 = *definitely disagree*, 6 = *definitely agree*;  $\alpha = .65$ ;  $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ).
- **Religiosity:** 5 items were combined to create a religiosity index. E.g., “My religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life”. (varying Likert-like response scales;  $\alpha = .87$ ;  $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ )

## Study 2: Method

### Participants

- 206 undergraduate students (144 females;  $M_{age} = 20.31$ ,  $SD_{age} = 5.08$ )

### Procedure and Materials

- **Cynicism:** 23-item cynicism content scale of the MMPI-2 (Butcher et al., 1989). Eg., “I have often met people who were supposed to be experts who were no better than I”. (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .87$ ;  $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ )
- **Doomsday prepping beliefs:** 4-item Prepper Beliefs subscale of the Post-Apocalyptic & Doomsday Prepping Beliefs Scale (Fetterman, 2018). Eg., “It is important for people to prepare for the collapse of society by stockpiling guns and ammunition”. (1 = *completely disagree*, 5 = *completely agree*;  $\alpha = .54$  ;  $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ )
- **Religiosity:** 12-item 4 basic dimensions of religiousness scale. (Saroglou, 2009) Eg., “Referring to a religious tradition is important for my cultural/ethnic identity” (1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*;  $\alpha = .97$ ;  $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ )

## Study 1: Results

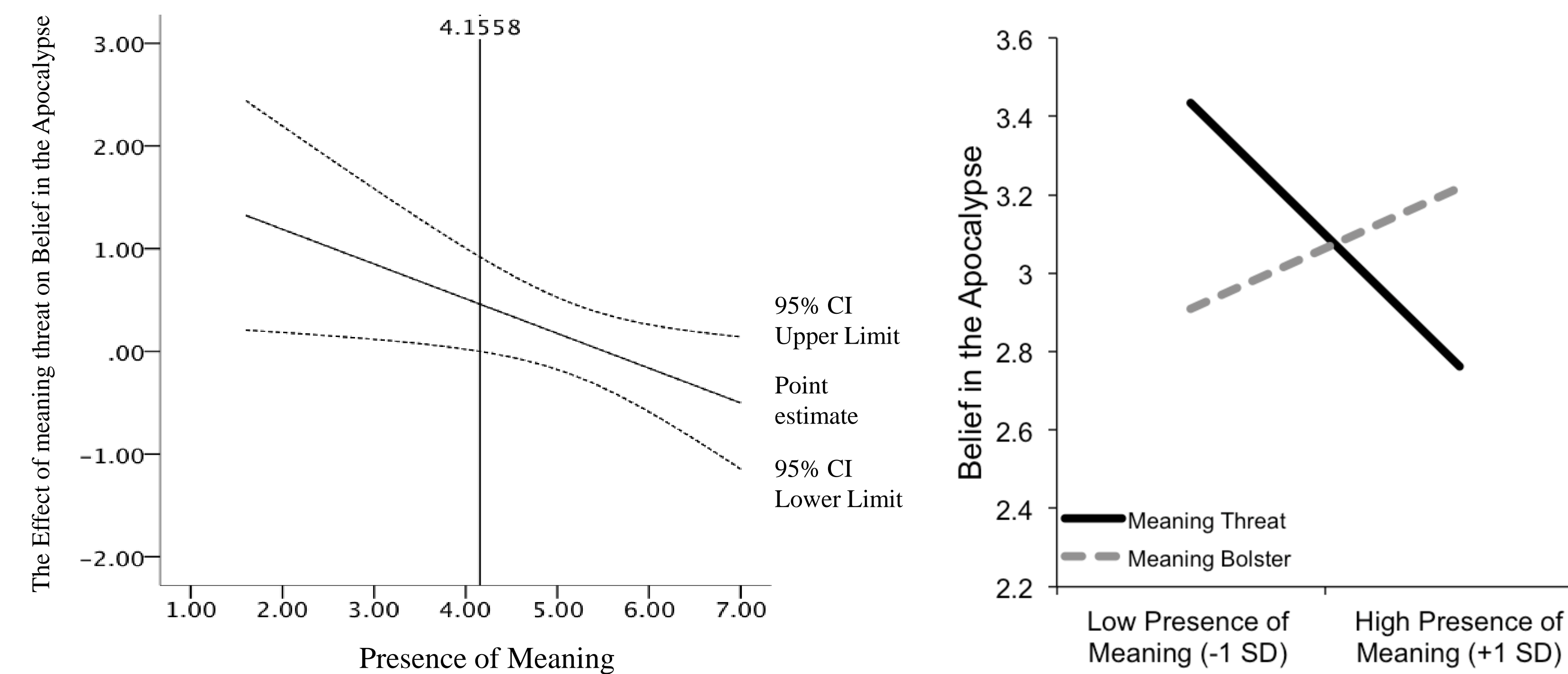


Figure 1. The effect of meaning threat on belief in the apocalypse across the presence of meaning scale, the line is the level of presence of meaning where the effect becomes significant at  $p < .05$

## Study 2: Results

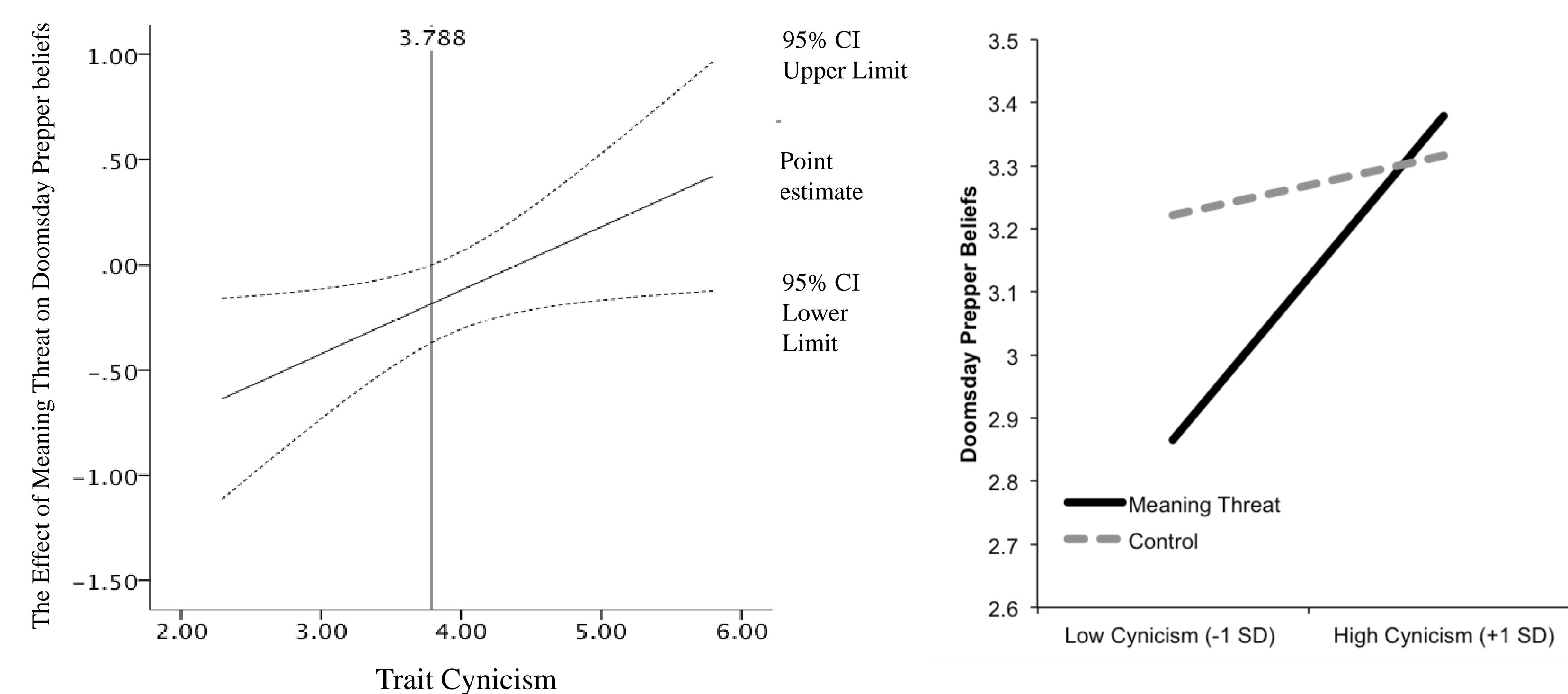


Figure 2. The effect of meaning threat on doomsday prepper beliefs across the cynicism scale, the line is the level of cynicism where the effect becomes significant at  $p < .05$

## Discussion

- **Hypothesis 1 supported:** Meaning threat, relative to meaning bolster, increased belief in the impending apocalypse among people low, but not high, in presence of meaning.
- **Hypothesis 2 partially supported:** Meaning threat, relative to control, did not significantly increase doomsday-prepping beliefs among people high in cynicism as predicted, but did decrease doomsday-prepping beliefs among people low in cynicism.

## Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

- Both studies support the argument that apocalyptic beliefs can serve as a source for meaning, particularly for people who lack a sense of meaning in life or are cynical about the conditions of the world.
- Research on the effects of apocalyptic beliefs is scarce, further investigation into the conditions under which beliefs about the end of the world become meaningful is needed. Potential conditions to explore may include religious fundamentalism, lack of structure/ chaotic lifestyle, and loneliness. One avenue is to follow up with a preregistered study using a bigger sample.
- A Limitation of this study is the insignificant effect of high cynicism on increased doomsday prepper beliefs, perhaps a stronger manipulation is needed.

## References

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