



# The Sky is Falling: The Effect of Catastrophic Headlines on Death Thought Accessibility and Belief in Just World

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## Background

- News headlines often convey one catastrophe after another.
- To the extent people believe the world is fair and just, such exposure to catastrophic headlines may be psychologically threatening (Lerner, 1980)
- Terror Management Theory (TMT) suggests information that threatens one's worldview can activate death related thoughts (Webber et al., 2015).
- **Research Question:** Does exposure to catastrophic headlines decrease belief in a just world and increase death thought accessibility? What are moderators of these potential effects?

## Method

### Part 1

- Pretest conducted to identify more or less catastrophic headlines.
- N = 312 participants viewed and rated headlines on how catastrophic they found them.
- For example:  
Firefighters in Bolivia Lose Hope of Taming  
Blazes as Burned Area Doubles  
vs  
Musicians Switch to Outdoor Rehearsal Spaces
- 10 catastrophic and 10 non-catastrophic were identified

### Part 2

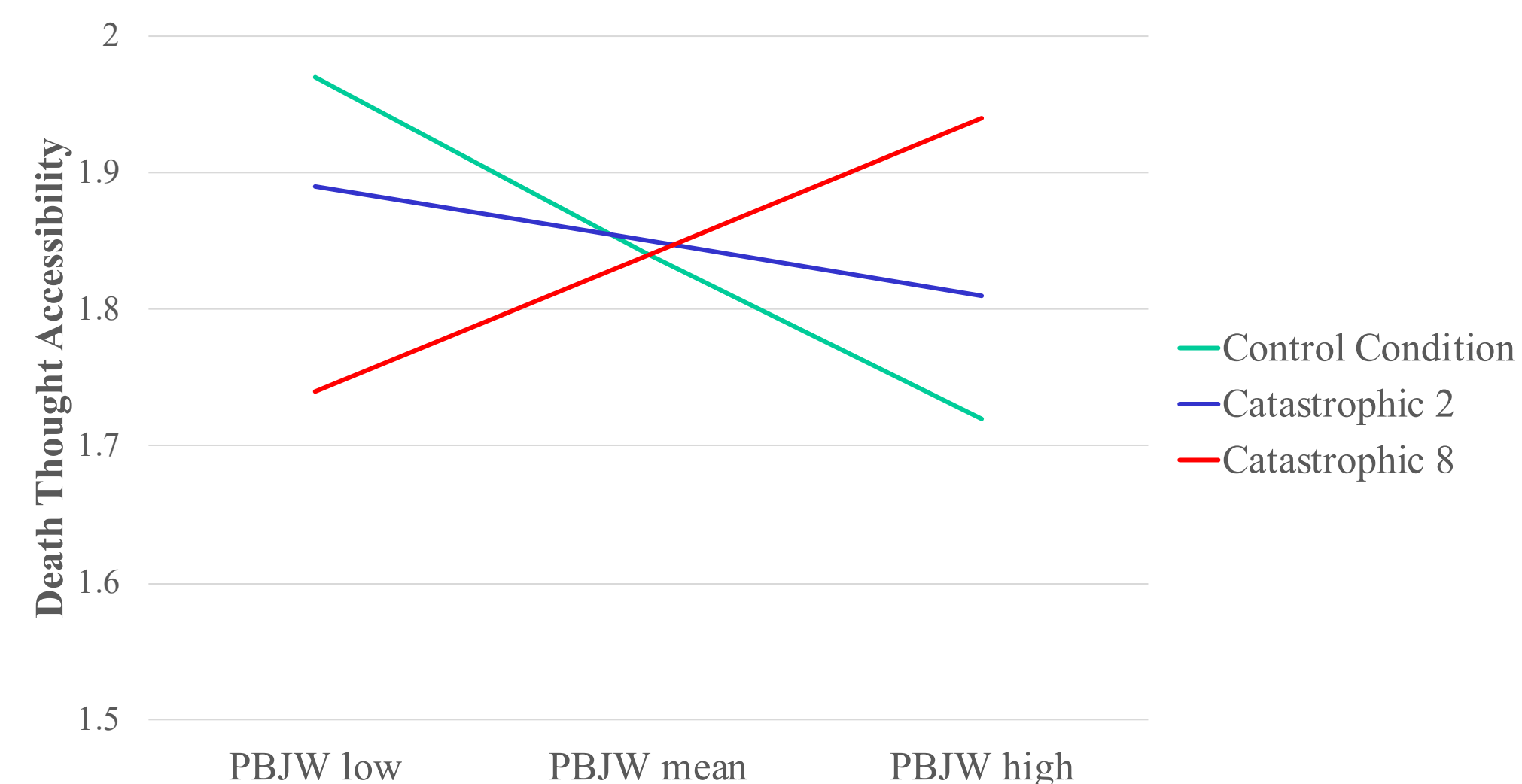
- Separate samples of participants (N = 849) randomly assigned to one of three conditions:
  - 0 catastrophic headlines
  - 2 catastrophic headlines
  - 8 catastrophic headlines
- Participants then completed outcome measures, including:
  - Death thought accessibility (DTA)
  - General belief in a just world (GBJW)
  - Personal belief in a just world (PBJW)
  - Social media enjoyment & time spent on social media

## Results: Initial Findings

	Control	2 Cat	8 Cat
DTA	1.84 (1.04)	1.86 (1.00)	1.85 (1.01)
PBJW	4.86 (1.11)	4.81 (1.14)	4.76 (1.09)
GBJW	4.32 (1.21)	4.18 (1.29)	4.05 (1.25)
BDW	4.11 (1.50)	4.08 (1.40)	4.02 (1.37)
Social Media Usage	3.55 (1.58)	3.65 (1.54)	3.56 (1.58)
Social Media Enjoyment	4.45 (.99)	4.51 (.96)	4.43 (1.05)

- Results: conditions differed in GBJW,  $F(2,849) = 3.02, p = .049$
- Participants exposed to 8 catastrophic headlines reported lower GBJW than those exposed to 0 catastrophic headlines ( $p = .043$ )
- No other conditions differed ( $p > .57$ )

## Results: Interaction between PBJW and condition predicting DTA



## Results: Examining Interactions

- The effect of the condition on DTA depended on the participants PBJW
  - Participants with low PBJW trended toward lower DTA when exposed to 8 than 2 or 0 headlines,  $t(848) = 1.81, p = .549$
  - Participants with high PBJW trended toward higher DTA when exposed to 8 than 2 or 0 headlines,  $t(848) = 1.76, p = .078$

## Discussion

- The conditions differed in levels of BJBW, and this impacted their DTA.
- Those with high BJBW may have had their worldview threatened by so much presumed evidence that the world is not as just as they may have once believed.
- Those with low belief in just world had the opposite effect, more thoughts of death with fewer catastrophic headlines, but likely for the same reason.
- We can conclude from this that catastrophic headlines can have an impact on DTA and BJBW.
- **Future directions:** Given the rise of nationalist beliefs seen worldwide recently, it could be interesting to see if those with high PBJW who looked at the news often demonstrated higher nationalism. Given that death related thoughts tend to cause one to close in on their close values, it's possible that catastrophic news headlines could cause those that love their country to become more viciously nationalist.

### References

1. Lerner M.J. (1980) The Belief in a Just World. In: The Belief in a Just World. Perspectives in Social Psychology. Springer, Boston, MA
2. Webber, D et al. (2015). Emotion as a necessary component of threat-induced death thought accessibility and defensive compensation. *Motivation and Emotion*, 39, 142–155.