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Abstract

This study attempts to integrate the predictions of defensive attribution theory (DAT; Shaver, 1970) and the parasocial contact hypothesis (PCH; Schiappa, Allen, & Gregg, 2005) to formulate a method for minimizing the propensity to victim-blame survivors of sexual assault. Despite national conversations surrounding consent and sexual assault emerging, the statistics of its prevalence continues to rise, and with it, the ignorance that results in victim-blaming (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018; Edwards, Turchik, Dardis, Reynolds, & Gidycz, 2011). By integrating the ideas of DAT (Shaver, 1970) and the PCH (Schiappa et al., 2005) this thesis examines how the establishment of personal and situational relevance felt toward sexual assault survivors can serve to minimize the tendency to victim-blame sexual assault survivors. Respondents (N = 176) participated in a 2 (depiction of sexual assault survivor: male or female) × 2 (message recipient: male or female) quasi-experiment, in which they were exposed to a story of a survivor coping with their assault. Participants were then asked to report their perceived homophily with the survivor, social distance between themselves and the survivor, victim-blaming, and perpetrator-blaming. The results, their implications, limitations, and future research directions are discussed in relation to both DAT and the PCH.

Key words: *defensive attribution theory, parasocial contact hypothesis, sexual assault, victim-blaming*

Chapter 1: Introduction

According to a recent study done by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2018), more than one in four women (27%) and one in 14 men (7%) reported having survived sexual assault. The results of the same study showed around 81% of women and 43% of men had reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment and/or assault in their lifetime. A large majority of these victims (i.e., survivors) also report experiencing anxiety, depression, and changes in their life routines because of the assault (CDC, 2018).[1] Recent societal movements, such as the MeToo movement (Bennett, 2017), have gained momentum in raising awareness and combating the prevalence of sexual assault, but the data provided by the CDC indicate sexual violence is still a threat to men, women, and transgender folks alike. However, women experience sexual violence the most often and male perpetrators are the most common (CDC, 2018). Furthermore, the number of perpetrators who are convicted and jailed is minimal relative to the number who go unreported, uncaused, and/or unpunished; most perpetrators walk free while the survivors are left dealing with the deleterious effects (RAINN, 2018). Overall, these statistics indicate women are disproportionately assaulted, usually by male perpetrators, and survivors typically do not see their perpetrators punished for their crimes.

Another way sexual assault survivors are victimized is through rape myths, which are false and prejudicial beliefs held toward female survivors (Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974). There are a number of rape myths that have been continuously reinforced through socialization: For example, "husbands cannot rape their wives," "women enjoy rape," "women

[1] Results of recent studies indicate that perceptions differ based on which label is used when discussing those who have experienced sexual harassment or assault. Across three studies, Papendick and Bohner (2017) found that the term "survivor" is associated with "positive valence, activity, strength, and optimism, whereas "victim" [is] associated more with negative valence, passivity, weakness, and helplessness" (p. 16). As the author believes that these individuals should be discussed respectfully, the term "survivor" will be used when referring to those who have experienced sexual harassment or assault.

ask to be raped," and "women lie about being raped" (Edwards, Turchik, Dardis, Reynolds, & Gidycz, 2011). Consistently, men are more prone to accept the veracity of rape myths relative to women, who tend to more readily reject them (Edwards et al., 2011; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1992). Many rape myths stem from the core belief that rape can be avoided altogether if the survivor commits to resisting the advances of their perpetrator (Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974), and that women become "morally responsible" (p. 19) for submitting to the rapist by choosing to not resist. Indeed, sexual assault survivors experience victimization twice: The first time with the assault, and then the second time when they are mistreated by those to whom they disclose knowledge of the assault—typically health-care professionals and law-enforcement officials (Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974).

An additional stigmatization of sexual assault survivors is perpetrated through media coverage, which can further lead "to the trivialization, denial, and silencing of the experiences of many victims" (Serisier, 2017, p. 2). When cases involving rape are covered in the media, the survivors are scrutinized in ways that are not common for any other crime coverage (Serisier, 2017). This scrutinization involves sharing all of the survivor's actions during the time leading up to and during the assault, the survivor's personal sexual history, and the character of the survivor. Whether purposefully or not, this type of coverage leads to "media accounts commonly inferring that they [the survivors] are to blame, even if only partially, for the violence committed against them" (Serisier, 2017, p. 5). Conversely, perpetrators are not given nearly as much media coverage, unless they belong to a racial minority; however, if the perpetrator is of high status, they are typically regarded positively (e.g., as possessing a womanizer reputation; Serisier, 2017).

This vicious cycle of assault, victimization, and perpetuation of rape culture (i.e., the normalization of sexual assault; Serisier, 2017) will continue to wreak havoc on those who are vulnerable if nothing is done to break the progression. Because male survivors of sexual assault are not as common nor as widely publicized as female survivors (CDC, 2018; Serisier, 2017), males may be less prone toward empathizing with survivors. However, such a form of perspective-taking may offer one approach to combating the prevalence of victim-blaming survivors, as males are the most common perpetrators, regardless of the sex of the survivor (CDC, 2018). This thesis argues that by establishing a psychological connection between the observers—particularly males—and the survivors of an assault scenario, the victim-blaming tendencies noted above can be minimized. One way to increase perspective-taking, while potentially decreasing stigma and prejudicial attitudes, may be affected by establishing *judgmental leniency.*

Judgmental leniency, as defined within *defensive attribution theory* (DAT; Shaver, 1970), refers to the reluctance for observers to assign blame to others whom they perceive to be similar to themselves. While it has been noted in the past that judgmental leniency exists between women and survivors of sexual assault, the opposite—a tendency toward victim-blaming—has been noted more frequently for men (Gilmartin-Zena, 1983; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Key & Ridge, 2011; Workman & Freeburg, 1999). A form of *parasocial contact* involving a positive portrayal of an outgroup member in the media (Schiappa, Allen, & Gregg, 2005) could potentially be used to establish judgmental leniency between males and survivors; and thus, minimize the tendency to victim-blame. In integrating these two research areas, participants in the current study read a short newspaper article in order to establish parasocial contact between

individuals and a sexual assault survivor and recorded their attitudes and perceptions of the depiction that they read.

The current research has several theoretical and practical implications: (1) The combination of these two research areas has the potential to help mitigate victim-blaming behaviors, which are a common societal problem, (2) the parasocial contact hypothesis (PCH; Schiappa et al., 2005) and DAT (Shaver, 1970) have not yet been integrated and tested, and (3) although parasocial contact has been tested in relation to many outgroups across various mediated contexts with success, to the author's knowledge, parasocial contact has not been used to reduce prejudice surrounding survivors of sexual assault. To this end, and as background for this thesis, the literature review below begins with a description of each research tradition, followed by a rationale for the present research, wherein both theories will be integrated to investigate some potential psychological mechanisms underlying the connection between parasocial contact, prejudice, and victim-blaming.

Chapter 2: Prejudice Reduction Via Contact

Intergroup Contact

The premise of parasocial contact began with Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, which frames *direct contact*, or interpersonal contact (Pettigrew, 1998), between a majority and minority group as a mechanism for encouraging prejudice reduction. In his original conceptualization, Allport posited that, in order to decrease prejudice, four optimal conditions must be met amongst groups: equal group status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and the support of authorities or the law. Although the presence of all four conditions is not required for prejudice reduction, a meta-analysis of more than 500 intergroup contact studies showed stronger effect sizes in studies using all four of these requirements (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Pettigrew (1998) developed the *intergroup contact theory* (ICT) as an extension of Allport's contact hypothesis. Pettigrew (1998) claimed equal group status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, support of authorities, and cross-group friendships are fundamental in reducing prejudice towards outgroup members. Pettigrew further explained how intergroup contact spurs change within individuals in four different ways: (1) learning about the outgroup, which can lead to disconfirming stereotypes, (2) changing behavior, which he claimed was the precursor of attitude change, (3) generating affective ties with outgroup members, and (4) increasing empathy. In essence, ICT posited how personal factors can affect prejudice reduction depending on certain key circumstances of individual contact.

In a meta-analysis, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) examined the relationship between direct contact, prejudice reduction, and common mediating variables of ICT across 500 studies, and found a consistent, inverse relationship between direct contact and prejudice. Furthermore, their results revealed two common mediating variables: empathy, which positively affects the relationship, and intergroup anxiety, which has a negative effect. The researchers noted how instances of contact can not only decreased prejudice toward individual outgroup members, but such episodes can also decrease prejudice towards the outgroup in general.

Relevant to this thesis, although Pettigrew and Tropp noted the largest effects emerged from samples involving contact between straight individuals and members of the LGBTQ+ community, intergroup samples have been recruited from multiple contexts. One such example can be seen from the results of McKenna et al.'s (2018) study examining intergroup contact as a result of ethnic diversity in an Australian community. By way of a self-report survey, participants reported how many friends from other cultures they have, how much threat they feel from the outgroup, and the social cohesion they feel within their own ingroup. Across age and

level-of-education groups, the results indicated ethnic diversity (i.e., increased contact with outgroup members) led to trust of the outgroup via direct contact as well as a decrease in intergroup threat.

Based on previous research, it is clear there is a consistent relationship between direct contact and prejudice reduction. A parallel and related area of study that has recently received increased attention is the relationship between *indirect contact* and prejudice reduction. In their review of studies utilizing Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, Hewstone and Swart (2011) integrated the impact of indirect contact into their theorizing: more specifically, the impact of extended contact and imagined contact. *Extended contact* refers to when one observes an ingroup member having a relationship with an outgroup member (i.e., a straight person observing a relationship between another straight person and a gay person). While examining the effects of *Will & Grace*, Ortiz and Harwood (2007) found an increased identification with Grace (a straight character in the show who has a gay roommate) was inversely related to intergroup anxiety and social distance toward gay men.

Relatedly, *imagined contact* refers to prejudice reduction by way of imagining an interaction with an outgroup member. For example, Harwood, Paolini, Joyce, Rubin, and Arroyo (2011) found participants who imagined a positive interaction with an undocumented immigrant held significantly more positive attitudes toward the outgroup compared to those who imagined a negative interaction. Most relevant for the current study, parasocial contact is another type of indirect contact that has been identified as a means of prejudice reduction. In essence, *parasocial contact* describes how positive depictions of outgroup members in the media could serve to reduce prejudice (Schiappa et al., 2005). Although a large majority of parasocial contact research now involves prejudice reduction, the parasocial phenomena first began in the mass

communication literature with Horton and Wohl (1956). To better understand the potential for prejudice reduction via parasocial contact, the different types of parasocial experience will be explicated next.

Parasocial Experience

Horton and Wohl's (1956) original explanation of *parasocial interaction* (PSI) involved the idea that people may have one-sided interactions with characters depicted in broadcast media (e.g., radio, TV, and movies) and develop bonds with these characters via media portrayals, without actually meeting them in person. Although one can argue these types of relationships cannot develop to complete fruition because of their one-sided nature, Horton and Wohl claimed repeated contact can nonetheless lead viewers to become psychologically attached to the point of feeling as though they hold personal friendships with the media characters. Since Horton and Wohl's seminal article, there has been much debate regarding the lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the bond that develops between an audience member and a media character. Thus, from this original conceptualization, researchers began to further investigate these media effects by using two distinct terms: PSI and *parasocial relationships* (PSRs).

On the one hand, a PSI occurs when one feels a sense of immediacy (i.e., psychological closeness; Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2015) accompanied by a perception of reciprocity (i.e., perceiving that the media figure or performer can see the audience member's reactions; Dibble et al., 2015). During a PSI, one may feel the media figure or performer is aware they are being watched and will subsequently adjust their behavior both verbally (e.g., adjusting the words or phrases being used) and nonverbally (e.g., adjusting eye gaze). When examining the mechanism underlying PSI, Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) found a strong perception of bodily and verbal addressing was related to a stronger parasocial experience. By extension, this parasocial

experience was positively related to perspective-taking of the speaker, as well as other behavioral outcomes. Dibble et al. (2015) added that a successful PSI (i.e., felt reciprocity between viewer and performer) leads to one feeling as if they are a "part of a normal social interaction" (p. 24).

Although PSIs focus on the feeling of being addressed directly by a media figure, PSRs describe the bond one develops with a media figure spanning multiple interactions (Dibble et al., 2005). PSRs and interpersonal relationships have many similarities. First, people tend to compare their own social relationships to their PSRs (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Second, similar to interpersonal relationships, attachment styles impact how PSRs develop (Cole & Leets, 1999). Third, individuals feel a high level of commitment in maintaining their PSRs (Eyal & Dailey, 2012). Additionally, emotional bonds that develop with PSRs can strengthen to the point that when PSRs dissolve, it can mirror an interpersonal breakup (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). Although both PSIs and PSRs have received a substantial amount of attention (Dibble et al., 2015; Giles, 2002; Schiappa, Allen, & Gregg, 2007), parasocial contact will be tested in the current study.

Although PSI and PSRs are not the focus of the current study, there are common ideas and relationships between these two concepts and parasocial contact. Schiappa et al. (2005) first tested parasocial contact by using interpersonal scales that are often used to measure PSI and PSRs with some success. While PSI and PSRs are often used in comparison to interpersonal interaction and social relationships, parasocial contact focuses more on prejudice reduction, which is why it is the focus of this study.

Parasocial Contact

Schiappa et al. (2005) proposed the parasocial contact hypothesis (PCH) as another extension of Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis. The authors posited the mechanism underlying prejudice reduction via intergroup contact can be replicated through mediated means as a way of

learning about the outgroup: For example, through observing outgroup members on TV programs or movies. Across three studies, Schiappa et al. (2005) found support for the PCH by exposing straight participants to gay characters from *Six Feet Under* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (see Study 1 and 2) and a comedy stand-up routine performed by Eddie Izzard, a male-cross dresser (see Study 3). In the first study, the researchers repeatedly exposed participants to *Six Feet Under*, a television show with two characters who identify as gay men. This exposure was related to a decrease in prejudice towards the gay characters, as well as an increase in physical attraction, social attraction (i.e., how desirable interaction with the character would be), task attraction (i.e., how participants would feel about working with the character), and perceived homophily (i.e., how similar or different participants perceived the characters from themselves).

Similarly, in Study 2, the researchers found exposure to the gay characters on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* was inversely related to prejudice toward the characters. In addition, prejudice toward the characters was negatively related to social attraction, physical attraction, and perceived homophily. Study 3 revealed a similar pattern between prejudice and mediated contact after participants were exposed to Eddie Izzard, a comedian who cross-dresses as part of his act. Furthermore, in all three studies, the researchers not only found that parasocial contact with the specific character decreases prejudice toward the outgroup member, but it also reduces prejudice toward the outgroup as a whole.

In a follow-up study, Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes (2006) asked participants to report their viewing frequency of *Will & Grace*, their level of prejudice towards gay men, and their social attractiveness toward, and perceived realism of the characters. Schiappa et al. (2006) found further support for the PCH in this study; namely, increased viewing frequency of *Will &*

Grace was inversely related with prejudice towards gay men. Notably, the results showed these relationships were more pronounced for participants who had less direct contact with members of the LGBTQ+ community. Overall, using three different methods and various media sources, Schiappa et al. (2005, 2006) found consistent support for the PCH.

Empirical Support for Parasocial Contact Hypothesis

Since Schiappa et al.'s (2005) conceptualization of parasocial contact, scholars have continued to test the PCH using different methods and media sources. In addition to Schiappa et al., other researchers have utilized TV/video exposure to investigate the PCH (Pan & Zeng, 2018). However, TV exposure is not the only type of media that can cause prejudice reduction: For example, researchers have used exposure to newspaper articles (Ramasubramanian, 2015), news segments (Phua, 2016), and online contact (White, Turner, Verrelli, Harvey, & Hanna, 2018) to investigate the underlying mechanisms of the PCH. In the subsequent paragraphs, the empirical support for PCH across mediated contexts will be discussed in further detail.

Pan and Zeng (2018) sought to investigate whether the level of perceived similarity, empathy, and physical attraction would differ based on the matching of race between participants and the media figure they were observing. The researchers cut two different videos: One showing an African American athlete (i.e., Kobe Bryant), and the other showing an Asian athlete (i.e., Jeremy Lin) playing basketball. African American participants reported the highest amount of similarity, empathy, and physical attraction with Kobe Bryant, whereas Asian participants reported the highest amount of these outcome variables with Jeremy Lin. In essence, matching the race of the participant and the media figure significantly increased perceived similarity, empathy, and physical attraction.

Similarly, Ramasubramanian (2015) created a news booklet filled with stories about outgroup celebrities that either confirmed or disconfirmed racial stereotypes and asked questions regarding participants' symbolic racism beliefs, their stereotypical perceptions of African Americans (i.e., stereotypical negative traits about the outgroup) and their attitudes towards affirmative action policies. Those who were exposed to counter-stereotypical portrayals of African American celebrities (i.e., Morgan Freeman and Beyoncé Knowles), reported significantly lower levels of stereotypical perceptions and symbolic racist beliefs of African Americans. There was also a significant indirect relationship between portrayal of the outgroup and symbolic racist beliefs via stereotypical perceptions. In other words, exposure to counter-stereotypical portrayals of African Americans was negatively correlated to stereotypical perceptions, but stereotypical perceptions had a positive relationship with symbolic racist beliefs. Finally, they also found a negative relationship between symbolic racist beliefs and support for affirmative action policies. Overall, this change in prejudice had the potential to lead to a change in behavior in supporting affirmative action policies, which is in line with the PCH. By extension, the contact that participants had with these African American celebrities impacted their preconceived beliefs about the group.

There have also been studies in which researchers have used some degree of online intergroup contact to examine its effect on prejudice. White et al. (2018) utilized online chat rooms to create the illusion of being in contact with an outgroup member. Participants were either assigned to an e-contact condition or a baseline condition: The e-contact condition involved synchronous online communication with a computer programed to respond as an outgroup member while those in the baseline condition wrote about a scene found in nature. Those in the e-contact condition reported a stronger intention to interact with an outgroup

member positively in the future. Communicating with an outgroup member via online chatting also reduced intergroup anxiety, and improved outgroup attitudes. Taken together, these results offer further support for how exposure to outgroup members can foster a reduction in prejudicial attitudes.

The PCH has also been used to increase credibility, while decreasing stigma, surrounding groups based on physical appearance. For example, Phua (2016) utilized a public service announcement (PSA) pulled from a campaign whose goal was to combat obesity and its negative health effects. More specifically, Phua was interested in observing whether similarity to the individual in the PSA (i.e., an overweight person observing an overweight person in the PSA) increased credibility of the spokesperson, parasocial identification (i.e., amount of emotional and cognitive identification with the speaker), and exercise self-efficacy. Notably, the participants weight significantly influenced perceptions of credibility as well as parasocial identification with the spokesperson. In other words, overweight individuals viewed the spokesperson as more credible, presumably because they could identify with them. Further, this credibility and identification significantly affected exercise self-efficacy, meaning those who identified and trusted the spokesperson were more likely to adopt their message along with the intention to change their behavior.

Although the PCH has been tested successfully across numerous contexts and methods, its predictions have not yet been applied to a reduction in prejudice surrounding sexual assault survivors. In the current study, participants will be exposed to depictions of sexual assault survivors with the intent of retesting the PCH within this context. However, relative to how women are likely to perceive the nature of sexual assault, it might be difficult to confront the lack of consequence many men are likely to perceive associated with sexual assault survivors,

because of how less often men are survivors of sexual assault compared to women (CDC, 2018), and the lack of portrayals of male survivors in the media (Serisier, 2017). Although it is essential for a civilized society to reduce the negative attributions the general public makes toward survivors of sexual assault in general, it is clear that changing the attitudes of men is a more urgent need within this context. This need is even more pressing given the fact that men are the most common perpetrators of sexual assault (CDC, 2018), while also being the strongest endorsers of rape myths (Edwards et al., 2011; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1992). One way men can begin to feel more connection and empathy toward sexual assault survivors is by establishing judgmental leniency, which decreases the psychological distance felt between a message recipient and a person who has been involved in a serious misfortune by creating personal and situational relevance. Judgmental leniency was introduced as part of DAT (Shaver, 1970), which will be discussed in the context of the current study next.

Chapter 3: Defensive Attribution Theory

Origins of Defensive Attribution Theory

The development of DAT began with Walster (1966), who was interested in investigating why only some individuals tend to place blame on others who are the survivors of an uncontrollable circumstance. When one observes another who is experiencing a negative outcome caused by chance, blame is usually withheld, but Walster argued that humans do not deal well with the unknown. Walster claimed that to perceive some semblance of control over possible negative outcomes, one tends to question what could have been done to avoid them. Walster argued that as the negative consequences of a situation become more severe, the observer begins to consider whether the person who experienced the unfortunate circumstance (i.e., the stimulus person), could have committed to different actions and avoided the outcome

altogether. She further noted that individuals tend to question the stimulus person's choices as a way of psychologically distancing themselves from the outcome they are observing. In other words, individuals tend to create a personal distance between themselves and the stimulus person as a means of reassuring themselves they could avoid a similar outcome.

In testing this hypothesis, Walster (1966) conducted a study in which participants observed a case study involving a car rolling down a hill which may or may not have been caused by the owner. The case study revolved around a stimulus person named Lennie, who was described as a male comparable in age to the participants as well as being a relatively new driver. In the case study, Lennie was said to have parked his car at the top of a hill and pulled the handbrake before leaving it unattended. Nevertheless, the brake cable snapped and the car rolled down the hill, causing different degrees of destruction based on the condition in which participants were assigned.

Walster (1966) created four different tapes that participants were randomly assigned to watch: In the first tape, the car was stopped by a tree stump down the road and Lennie's car was not damaged. In the second tape, the car was not stopped and hit a large tree at the bottom of the hill, causing considerable damage to the car itself. The third tape was similar to the first: The car was stopped by a tree stump down the road, causing no damage, although it was hinted if the car had reached the bottom of the hill, it could have harmed others. Finally, in the fourth tape, the car rolled all the way down the hill and crashed into a grocery store, hitting a young boy at the counter, and the cashier, hospitalizing the cashier for most of the following year.

Walster (1966) deemed each tape as causing more severe consequences than the last (i.e., tape one had the least severe consequences whereas tape four had the most), and asked participants to report their opinion about how responsible and how careless Lennie was in the

situation, as well as how much they liked Lennie. The results indicated a positive relationship between severity of consequences and blame placement towards Lennie for the accident, regardless of whether harm was caused to others or not. Similarly, as severity of consequences increased, participants were more likely to indicate a moral responsibility for car owners to have their brakes checked regularly. Additionally, there was a significant difference between how men and women rated Lennie's level of responsibility: Although men assigned more responsibility to Lennie when the car hit the cashier in tape four compared to only hearing about the possibility of harming someone in tape three, women rated him equally responsible across both tapes. Finally, the perception of carelessness did not differ based on condition.

In sum, Walster (1966) concluded if an accident is perceived as more severe, the observer tends to attribute more blame to the agent who experienced the accident. In other words, if the observers themselves were in the situation instead, they would have acted differently, thereby causing a less severe outcome. Walster claimed this is the observers' way of psychologically distancing themselves from the stimulus person in order to preserve the idea that they are unable to cause such severe outcomes.

However, Walster (1967) was unable to replicate these initial findings in a follow-up study wherein she presented a story to participants involving Alex Kendler, who was a student described to be moving to Nevada to accept a new research job; with this move, he was to buy a new house. Alex was said to have acknowledged the many possible risks in moving, but financial gains appeared to be greater. Based on whichever experimental condition participants were assigned to, Alex was said to have gained money in buying the house (i.e., $10,000, $1,000, $100, or $10), he had broke even in buying the house, or he had lost money in buying the house (i.e. $10,000, $1,000, $100, or $10). Additionally, if Alex had gained a substantial amount of

money in buying the house, the research job was extended. Contrarily, if Alex lost a substantial amount of money in buying the house, his job was terminated; and if Alex had lost or gained $10, or broke even in buying the house, the research job was maintained.

Participants were asked to report how they would have anticipated a gain or loss in money, if they were in Alex's situation. Additionally, they indicated the extent to which Alex should have known about the positive or negative outcome he experienced, if they would have bought the house themselves, and their prediction in how long Alex's job would have lasted in Nevada after moving there. Notably, although Walster hypothesized severity of outcome in moving to Nevada (i.e., money gained or lost) would have predicted greater blame placement, the results showed the opposite; less responsibility was attributed to Alex whenever he gained or lost a substantial amount of money as opposed to a more trivial outcome. Walster (1967) could no longer claim the relationship between severity of outcomes and blame-placement as she originally did. It was not until Shaver's (1970) DAT study that these inconsistent findings were further investigated and explained.

Defensive Attribution Theory

Shaver (1970) argued there was a lack of perceived personal and situational relevance between the participants in Walster's (1967) study: Participants in the 1967 study were college-aged individuals unconcerned about the housing market, whereas Alex was an older adult who was concerned because of his future move. Shaver reasoned that these inconsistencies between the participants and Alex led to the lack of significant findings in Walster's (1967) study and tested this relevance/similarity hypothesis by replicating and extending Walster's (1966) study involving Lennie and his car, by having Lennie be either similar or different from the participants in age. In the younger age condition, Lennie was described as a 16-year-old high-

school student, in the same age condition he was said to be a 19-year-old college student, and in the older age condition he was said to be a 22-year-old graduate student.

In support of Shaver's (1970) expectations, the results indicated when Lennie was said to be the same age as the participants, he was not assigned as much responsibility for the accident compared to when he was said to be younger or older. Furthermore, the participants perceived the same-aged Lennie as being more careful than his younger and older counterparts. Lastly, Shaver did not find a significant difference in amount of blame-assignment caused by the severity of outcome manipulation. These findings support the idea of judgmental leniency, or the reluctance to assign blame to individuals who observers perceive to be similar to themselves. This concept also works in the opposite direction: When individuals feel they do not relate to another individual, they tend to increase their attribution of blame. In order to establish judgmental leniency, the observer must perceive both personal and situational relevance between themselves and the stimulus person.

Shaver (1970) explained *personal relevance* is experienced whenever an observer feels a sense of similarity to the stimulus person by way of shared beliefs, sex, appearance, and values. On the other hand, *situational relevance* is felt whenever an observer can more easily see themselves in the shoes of the stimulus person, that is, in a situation similar to the one in which the other person is involved. When the observer feels both types of relevance with the stimulus person, they tend to defend themselves against the thought of a similar fate befalling them by blaming external and extenuating circumstances and holding that the stimulus person did everything they could to prevent the outcome.

By refraining from assigning blame to the stimulus person whom the observer feels psychologically close to, they are minimizing their own responsibility if they were to find

themselves in the same situation. This defensive attribution hypothesis was further supported by the results of Burger's (1981) meta-analysis. By combining the statistical results of 22 DAT studies, Burger found personal and situational relevance mitigated the effects of victim-blaming significantly more compared to whenever these concepts were not present. Additionally, although he found the severity-responsibility relationship across the 22 studies, the results indicated the establishment of judgmental leniency is not contingent on its presence. Thus, Burger stated the severity of outcomes may not hold as much power in DAT as Walster (1966) previously claimed.

Shaver (1970) argued because situational relevance was present in both his and Walster's (1966) study, situational relevance must be held constant in DAT studies so that the degree of personal relevance can impact the amount of blame-placement given. In explicating this difference, Shaw and McMartin (1977) established two distinct concepts: harm-avoidance and blame-avoidance. *Harm-avoidance* is characterized by high situational relevance, but low personal relevance with the stimulus person. These types of attributions are marked by an increased blame-placement on the stimulus person in order to create psychological distance between the observer and the stimulus person. By extension, observers are attempting to convince themselves they are more cautious and responsible than the stimulus person. On the other hand, *blame-avoidance* is characterized by both high situational and personal relevance. It is with this type of attribution that observers tend to avoid placing blame on the stimulus person because of their perceived similarity. In essence, this is the observers' way of defending themselves against a similar fate.

Empirical Support for Defensive Attribution Theory

Now that the concepts of DAT have been explicated, empirical support of DAT will be reviewed so as to better understand the psychological mechanisms underlying victim-blaming. This leads to the introduction of two commonly used areas of study examining DAT and blame-placement: Domestic violence (Yamawaki, Ochoa-Shipp, Pulsipher, Harlos, & Swindler, 2012) and sexual violence (Gilmartin-Zena, 1983; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Key & Ridge, 2011; Workman & Freeburg, 1999).

Yamawaki et al. (2012) used an experimental design to investigate the propensity to blame survivors in situations of domestic violence. Across all conditions, compared to women, men showed a greater tendency to both minimize the seriousness of the assault and blame the survivor. The relationships observed in this study supported DAT: Both personal and situational relevance helped predict how individuals place blame on victims of circumstance (i.e., the stimulus person, or in this case, the survivors portrayed in this study). Similarly, these concepts and their relationships to each other can be observed in situations regarding sexual violence.

Key and Ridge (2011) presented their participants with eight different scenarios that each depicted men engaging in harassment behaviors in various settings (i.e., restaurant, law office, and retail shops, among others). The participants then filled out a scale to measure their sexual harassment proclivity, or their likelihood to sexually harass women. The results indicated high-proclivity men judged other harassers to be more personally relevant compared to low-proclivity men. High-proclivity men also tended to attribute more blame to the victims of harassment than low-proclivity men. In sum, the results indicated men high in proclivity viewed other harassers as being personally relevant, and by extension blamed these other harassers less. Notably, situational relevance was also felt between high-proclivity men and other harassers, because they

perceived that they could be in those situations themselves. Overall, the results of this study support a DAT analysis.

While Gilmartin-Zena (1983) did not research blame-placement in terms of sexual harassment, they did focus on situations involving sexual assault. Specifically, Gilmartin-Zena was interested in uncovering what personal attributes can influence how observers place blame in situations involving sexual assault, including the marital status of the survivor, the relationship between the survivor and the perpetrator, the degree of the survivor's resistance, the survivor's attire, and the severity of the consequences of the outcome. With these characteristics, Gilmartin-Zena created an "ideal" survivor (i.e., married, did not know the assailant, struggled during the assault, was conservatively dressed, and was severely injured during the assault) and a "non-ideal" survivor (i.e., divorced, did not struggle during the assault, was "provocatively" dressed, and incurred slight injuries during the assault). Gilmartin-Zena hypothesized more blame would be placed on the non-ideal survivor than the ideal survivor. Her results supported this prediction, but women still attributed significantly less blame to the non-ideal survivor compared to men. Although Gilmartin-Zena found a difference in attribution of blame based on the aforementioned personal characteristics (i.e., ideal versus non-ideal victim), the results also support a DAT analysis in that women attributed less blame to either of the assault survivors because of their perceived personal and situational relevance.

Similarly, Workman and Freeburg (1999) manipulated personal characteristics of the female survivor to test its effect on blame placement. Participants were presented with a scenario involving date rape between a male perpetrator and a female survivor. Additionally, participants were shown one of three pictures of the female survivor: These pictures differed in how long the survivor's skirt was (i.e., short, moderate, or long). Workman and Freeburg asked participants to

report their attribution of responsibility, their perception of situational relevance, and their perception of personal relevance to the individual who shared their biological sex (i.e., females to survivor; males to perpetrator). Across conditions, men attributed more responsibility to the survivor, but less responsibility to the perpetrator, compared to women. Furthermore, both men and women who observed the survivor in the short skirt condition attributed more responsibility to the survivor than those in the other two skirt conditions. Similarly to Gilmartin-Zena's (1983) results, personal characteristics of the survivor (i.e., length of skirt) impacted attribution of blame. However, women assigned significantly less blame to survivors than men overall, providing further support for DAT.

Finally, Grubb and Harrower (2009) presented their participants with three different scenarios involving rape, and across all three, the results indicated women felt more similar to the survivor compared to men, and men felt more similar to the perpetrator than the women did, which reinforces the importance of personal relevance. Further, men also blamed the survivor more than did women. Concerning situational relevance, participants who felt an increased identification with the perpetrator reported an increased propensity to victim-blame.

The results of all DAT studies above indicate both personal and situational relevance affect one's tendency to blame survivors. Overall, because male participants involved in these studies usually feel a personal relevance to perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence, they tend to blame the survivor more, but the perpetrator less, than their female counterparts. Conversely, the female participants typically felt personal relevance to the survivor, resulting in a greater responsibility attribution toward the perpetrators relative to the survivors. Furthermore, women tend to perceive a higher situational relevance with survivors compared to men because of how much more often they survive assault (CDC, 2018).

Chapter 4: The Current Study

This thesis integrates predictions from the PCH and DAT to explain the relationships between parasocial contact, prejudice, and blame placement in the context of sexual assault. DAT helps explain why males tend to show more reluctance in relating to sexual assault survivors while being more likely to engage in victim-blaming. Because men do not experience sexual assault at the same rate as women (CDC, 2018), they are more likely to feel a lack of situational relevance to survivors of sexual assault, and they are less likely to feel personal relevance because of the sex differences with the typical assault survivor. The PCH offers a potential avenue to mitigate the lack of situational and personal relevance. Observing a male survivor may help establish both personal and situational relevance for a male observer. As the PCH postulates, positive contact with an outgroup member via mediated means leads to an increase in perceived homophily as well as a decrease in social distance, as Schiappa et al. (2005) found in the seminal parasocial contact study. Taken together, merging the predictions of the DAT and PCH allows for examining how a tendency to victim-blame (especially among males) can be mitigated through positive contact with a male survivor, consequently resulting in a greater degree of homophily, a reduction in social distance, and ultimately placing the blame where it belongs, the perpetrators. In other words, parasocial contact could help bridge the perceived psychological distance resulting from sex differences and a lack of first-hand experience. Based on this research integration, three predictions are posited in the subsequent paragraphs.

The findings of past DAT research indicate that females tend to blame survivors of sexual and domestic assault less, while blaming perpetrators of the assault more relative to males (Bryant & Spencer, 2003; Gilmartin-Zena, 1983; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Yamawaki et al.,

2012). Overall, the results of these studies indicate women tend to feel a higher situational relevance to sexual assault survivors compared to men, because women are assaulted disproportionally more often (CDC, 2018), and, as a result, they have greater perceived homophily as well as less social distance between themselves and survivors. This reasoning forms the basis for the following hypothesized main effect:

> H1: Relative to females, male message recipients exposed to parasocial contact about sexual assault (a) feel less perceived homophily with survivors, (b) perceive more social distance between themselves and survivors, (c) exhibit more victim-blaming, and (d) blame perpetrators less.

Moreover, because women experience assault at a much greater rate than men (CDC, 2018), and female survivors are more common to observe in the media than male survivors (Serisier, 2017), it can be argued that individuals perceive male survivors differently from female survivors. Furthermore, male survivors tend to be revictimized by male rape myths (i.e., false beliefs about male assault survivors; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1992), which include such beliefs as, "men cannot be raped," "sexual assault is not as severe for a man as it is for a women," and "women cannot force a man to have sex" (Davies, 2002). Gender socialization during childhood fosters perceptions that men should be masculine, strong, assertive, and should be able to defend themselves from harm (Herek, 1986). When men are assaulted, they tend to be viewed as less masculine. There is also a popular belief that men should elect to have sex with a woman at any time, and that, if they refuse or do not enjoy it, they are not interested in women at all (Davies, 2002). Although stigma surrounds survivors of sexual assault regardless of their gender, the attributions of male survivors of sexual assault are likely to

be more negative relative to female survivors. This reasoning provides the basis for the following prediction:

> H2: Relative to a parasocial contact depiction of a female survivor, a depiction of a male survivor results in (a) less homophily with survivors, (b) more social distance between oneself and survivors, (c) more victim-blaming, and (d) less perpetrator-blaming.

The results of DAT studies are clear: Defensive attributions pose a barrier to a more empathic treatment of assault survivors (Gilmartin-Zena, 1983; Workman & Freeburg, 1999; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Key & Ridge, 2011). However, the PCH argues that negative perceptions and attributions can be overcome with a positive parasocial contact (Phua, 2016; Schiappa et al., 2005, 2006; White et al., 2018). Thus, the predictions from the DAT and PCH could be integrated to explicate these mitigating effects. Parasocial contact could help bridge the perceived psychological distance resulting from sex differences and a lack of first-hand experience by establishing both personal and situational relevance. Indeed, positive parasocial contact should help mitigate negative defensive attributions especially when individual characteristics such as sex of the survivor depicted and the individual reading the message are matched. Positive parasocial contact, especially between a male survivor and a male message recipient, should foster greater homophily and reduce the tendency to victim-blame, instead focusing the blame on a perpetrator. The integration of DAT with the PCH suggests the following prediction:

> H3: In parasocial contact, sex of the survivor depiction and sex of message recipient interact such that males who are exposed to a depiction of a male survivor feel (a) greater homophily with survivors, (b) less social distance between themselves and survivors, (c) exhibit less victim-blaming, and (d) blame perpetrators more than males exposed to a

depiction of a female survivor, while women exhibit the same effects but toward female survivors.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample (N = 176) of undergraduate students was recruited from a large university in the south-central United States. Their age ranged from 18 to 32 years old, with 76% of the participants (n = 133) self-identifying as female. In exchange for their time, participants were granted extra credit in a communication course of their choice. Approximately 74.3% of the sample indicated that they were White, 10.3% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5.7% Hispanic or Latino, 5.1% Black or African American, 4% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 0.6% Middle Eastern. Approximately 80% of the sample indicated they have not experienced sexual assault or abuse, with 60.6% of the sample reporting that someone close to them has experienced sexual assault or abuse.

Design and Procedure

A 2 (biological sex of message recipient: male vs. female) × 2 (depiction of sexual assault survivor: male vs. female) quasi-experimental design was employed wherein sex of the media figure is a manipulated variable and sex of the participant is a measured variable. This study was approved by the University's Internal Review Board (IRB) before recruitment began. Participants volunteered for the study through the communication department's research participation pool. They then were invited to complete the survey in lab via a Qualtrics online survey. After giving consent to participate, respondents were randomly assigned to one of two depictions of a sexual assault survivor. Parasocial contact was used as a constant: All participants read an altered, shortened version of a transcription of an 11-minute Ted Talk video of a male

sexual assault survivor (TEDx Talks, 2018). The sex of the depiction of the survivor was manipulated by informing the participants that the story was written by a male (i.e., Landon) or by a female (i.e., Lindsey). After reading the short story, participants were then asked to report their perceived similarity (i.e., homophily) to the survivor, perceived social distance between themselves and survivors, and their opinions regarding which party should be held responsible in the case of sexual assault. Participants were then debriefed and given information on how to contact the University's counseling center if needed. The debrief contained an explanation of the nature of the Ted Talk video (TEDx Talks, 2018), as well as information for how it was altered for the purpose of the study.

Independent Variables

As mentioned, to manipulate the sex of the depicted survivor, participants read an altered, shortened version of a Ted Talk presentation given by a real survivor of sexual assault (See Appendices A and B). Participants were told that they would be reading a short news article about an individual's traumatic experience, describing how this individual coped with it. If participants were randomly assigned to the male depiction condition, they read the story from Landon's perspective while those assigned to the female depiction condition read the story from Lindsey's perspective. The original Ted Talk presentation adapted for this study was given by a young male named Landon Wilcock, who at the time of the Ted Talk presentation was attending Queen's University in Canada. This particular stimulus was chosen because, like Landon, many participants in the sample are in their twenties and are college students. This level of similarity and identification between the survivor and the participants has been noted to combat defensive attributions in past investigations (Grubb & Harrower, 2009). Additionally, using an altered

version of the original transcript instead of crafting one contributes to the realism of the newspaper article.

Instrumentation

Preliminary remarks. The dependent variables (i.e., homophily, social distance, and blame placement) were measured using magnitude scales (Lodge, 1981). Relative to Likert-type or semantic differential scales that are bounded at both ends of the scale, using a magnitude scale allows discovering a true range of people's responses, helps avoid ceiling effects and limited range of variance, producing, as a result, more robust parameter estimates.

Participants were asked to indicate their attitudes or opinions on a scale from 0 to infinity, with 100 indicating a moderate amount. Exact wording on these instructions, as well as the indexes used, can be found in the appendices (Appendix C-E). All dependent variables were examined for outliers and violations of normality assumption. Variables that appeared non-normal were first winsorized by recoding outliers to a lower value and then transformed to help meet the assumption of normality (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Indexes of the dependent variables were formed by using principal component analysis with an unrotated one-component solution and saving standardized regression component scores, producing an index with M = 0.00, SD = 1.00, range ≈ -3 to +3 (Afifi, Clark, & May, 2004; DiStefano, Zhu, & Mîndrilă, 2009). The means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations between all variables in the study are provided in Table 1.

Dependent Variables

Homophily. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement across 8-items adopted from McCroskey, McCroskey, and Richmond (2006). Depending on which survivor depiction condition that participants were assigned to, they were asked to compare themselves to

either Landon or Lindsey (e.g., "Landon/Lindsey thinks like me"; and "Landon/Lindsey shares my values"; $\alpha = 0.92$).

Blame-placement. Participants in the current study were asked two questions each regarding the blame-worthiness of a survivor (e.g., "I think that in situations involving sexual assault, it is appropriate to blame the survivor for the outcome"; Pearson's $r = 0.62$) and a perpetrator (e.g., "I think that in situations involving sexual assault, it is appropriate to blame the perpetrator for the outcome"; Pearson's $r = 0.91$) of assault. The items used in the current study were adopted with some wording modifications from Grubb and Harrower (2009).

Social distance. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with 12 statements adopted from Esses and Dovidio (2002; e.g., *If given the opportunity, would you:* "Accept a sexual assault survivor as a family member through marriage?; and "Have a sexual assault survivor as a close friend?"; $\alpha = 0.98$). Lower values indicate greater social distance felt between oneself and survivors.

Covariates. Two covariates were controlled for in the final analysis. Because the goal of the current study is to investigate how parasocial contact impacts attributions of blame surrounding sexual assaults survivors, the first covariate employed was participants' *previous experience with sexual assault*, and the second covariate was *personal relationships with sexual assault survivors*. A similar approach was used in previous research: Schiappa et al. (2006), for instance, controlled for personal relationships with gay men in their investigation of parasocial contact, finding significant effects for this covariate. Thus, personal experience and relationships with survivors were controlled for in this study. To measure these covariates, single-item, dichotomous measures were employed.

Results

Before statistical tests were conducted, two cases were excluded from final analyses because their surveys were not completed. No systematically missing data were found. A Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) was used to test the hypotheses. Biological sex of the message recipient and depiction of a sexual assault survivor were entered as the independent variables, personal relationships with survivors and experience with assault were both entered as covariates, and perceived homophily, social distance, victim-blaming, and perpetrator-blaming were entered as the dependent variables. Before explicating these results, it should be mentioned that perpetrator blame tested as significant on Levene's test of equality of variance in running the MANCOVA, meaning that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was not met for this dependent variable (Field, 2018). All results including perpetrator blame should be read with caution.

Multivariate Effects

The multivariate effects of the two covariates were examined first. The multivariate effect of personal relationships with survivors, was not significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = .95$, $F(5, 163) = 1.74$, $p = .13$, but the univariate effects indicated this covariate significantly affected social distance between oneself and survivors, $F(1, 171) = 4.13$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, victim-blaming, $F(1, 171) = 5.59$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, and perpetrator blaming, $F(1,171) = 4.03$, $p = .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. The multivariate effect of experience with assault, was significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = .87$, $F(5, 163) = 4.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$, but the univariate effect was only significant for perceived homophily, $F(1, 171) = 9.72$, $p < .01$. Based on the significant effects of these covariates, both were retained in the final analysis. Additionally, the effect of biological sex of the message recipient was

significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = .85$, $F(5, 163) = 5.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$. No other multivariate effects were significant.

Hypotheses Tests

H1 predicted that relative to females, male message recipients exposed to parasocial contact about sexual assault (a) feel less perceived homophily with survivors, (b) perceive more social distance between themselves and survivors, (c) exhibit more victim-blaming, and (d) blame perpetrators less. The univariate effects showed no significant differences between biological sex of the observers on perceived homophily, $F(1, 171) = 0.39$, $p = 0.53$, victim-blaming, $F(1, 171) = 0.95$, $p = 0.33$, nor blaming the perpetrator, $F(1, 171) = 1.64$, $p = 0.10$. However, the univariate test of social distance was significant, $F(1, 171) = 3.78$, $p = 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$: Males reported greater social distance between themselves and survivors ($M = -0.31$, $SD = 0.95$) compared to females ($M = 0.09$, $SD = 0.99$), recall that lower scores indicate more social distance. Thus, H1 was partially supported.

H2 predicted that relative to a parasocial contact depicting of a female survivor, depictions of a male survivor result in (a) less homophily with survivors, (b) more social distance between oneself and survivors, (c) more victim-blaming, and (d) less perpetrator-blaming. The effect of the depiction of a sexual assault survivor was not significant for any of the dependent variables: perceived homophily, $F(1, 171) = 1.43$, $p = 0.23$, social distance, $F(1, 171) = 0.42$, $p = 0.83$, victim-blaming, $F(1, 171) = 0.77$, $p = 0.38$ or perpetrator blaming, $F(1, 171) = 0.05$, $p = 0.82$. Thus, H2 was not supported.

H3 predicted that in parasocial contact, sex of the survivor depiction and sex of message recipient interact such that males who are exposed to a depiction of a male survivor feel (a) greater homophily with survivors, (b) less social distance between themselves and survivors, (c)

exhibit less victim-blaming, and (d) blame perpetrators more, while women exhibit the same effects but toward female survivors. Univariate effects indicated that there were no significant differences found for perceived homophily, $F(1, 171) = 2.79$, $p = 0.09$, social distance, $F(1, 171) = 0.48$, $p = 0.49$, victim-blaming, $F(1, 171) = 0.38$, $p = 0.54$, or for perpetrator blaming, $F(1, 171) = 1.64$, $p = 0.20$. Thus, H3 was not supported.

Chapter 5: Discussion

According to a recent study done by the CDC (2018), 81% of women and 43% of men have experienced some form of sexual harassment and/or assault in their lifetime. Additionally, survivors of assault are typically portrayed negatively in the media, essentially re-victimizing survivors after their initial assault. Overall, the prevalence of sexual assault, as well as how survivors are treated afterward, contributes to a larger societal problem by reinforcing rape culture. In exploring how this societal trend can be changed, the current study sought to mitigate the propensity to victim-blame survivors of sexual assault by combining two distinct research areas: parasocial contact and defensive attributions.

By integrating the PCH and DAT, the goal of the current study was threefold: (1) The PCH and DAT have not yet been combined before in an empirical investigation, (2) investigating whether the integration of these two research areas mitigates the propensity to victim-blame, and (3) the PCH has not yet been tested in the context of mitigating the stigma surrounding sexual assault survivors. It was predicted that parasocial contact with a sexual assault survivor would have the ability to create personal and situational relevance between message recipients and survivors. Because males are most often the perpetrators of assault (CDC, 2018), and endorse rape myths more often than women (Edwards et al., 2011; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1992), the current study focused on establishing personal and situational relevance

between males and sexual assault survivors in order to mitigate the propensity to victim-blame. Additionally, this thesis sought to test other comparisons across experimental conditions to create a more comprehensive understanding of the integration of PCH and DAT.

The current study integrated the PCH and DAT by testing three different types of relationships between parasocial contact, prejudice reduction, and victim-blaming. The first hypothesis predicted a main effect of biological sex of the message recipient on perceived homophily, social distance, victim-blaming, and perpetrator blame; this prediction was partially supported. Males were found to feel a greater social distance between themselves and survivors of sexual assault compared to women. The second hypothesis predicted a main effect of the parasocial contact of the survivor on perceived homophily, social distance, victim-blaming, and perpetrator blame: This prediction was not supported, as there were no significant differences found between the male and female depictions of the survivor. Finally, the third hypothesis predicted an interaction effect between sex of the message recipient and depiction of the sexual assault survivor such that males message recipients who observe a male depiction of a survivor would report increased homophily, less social distance, less victim-blaming, and more perpetrator blame. The same interaction effect was expected between female message recipients and the female depictions of the survivor. This interaction effect hypothesis was not supported.

There were no significant findings to support the tenets of the PCH, as there was not a significant difference in attitudes based on the parasocial depiction condition that participants were assigned to. Possible limitations of the current study as well as future directions in spite of these nonsignificant findings will be discussed in depth further below. However, there is partial support for DAT with regard to victim-blaming. The results indicate that males felt a greater social distance between themselves and sexual assault survivors, supporting past DAT studies

(Gilmartin-Zena, 1983; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Key & Ridge, 2011). The non-significant finding for the interaction effect are likely due to low power in the analysis that can be attributed to a number of limitations, which will be addressed further in the subsequent section.

The lack of significant findings can potentially be explained by a campus-wide initiative to combat the prevalence of sexual assault: This initiative being the enforcement of the *Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics* (*Clery*) *Act* and the *Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (Campus SaVE) Act* (Campus SaVE Act, 2018) on college campuses. The *Clery Act* requires public and private universities who receive federal funding to disclose a detailed log of certain crimes committed on their campuses, including sexual violence, to the United States Department of Education annually. The *Campus SaVE Act* is an amendment to the *Clery Act* which further reinforces the transparency of this mandatory reporting; under the *Campus SaVE Act*, institutions must guarantee rights and due process to survivors of sexual violence and are required to hold sexual prevention and education programs for each incoming cohort. As the university in which the study was conducted is no exception to the *Clery Act* or the *Campus SaVE Act*, each incoming cohort is required to pass an education program about sexual and domestic violence.

Past research, such as Hinck and Thomas (1999), have found connections between these education programs and the degree of rape myth acceptance, namely, exposure to these workshops and programs mitigate the degree in which people endorse rape myths. Although rape myths were not explicitly measured in the current study, exposure to the mandatory program could have possibly impacted the propensity to victim-blame and the social distance held between themselves and survivors before the study even began. Moreover, exposure to recent societal movements, such as MeToo, could have impacted results in a similar way. However,

because this exposure was not measured, this cannot be definitively claimed (although random assignment helps mitigate this concern).

A practical application of the results of the current study relate to the depiction of the assault survivors. The depiction of the survivor used in the current study is reminiscent of recent and widely publicized victim impact statements (e.g., Johnson, 2018; Levenson & Cooper, 2018; Rowlings, 2018). For example, the case of Brock Turner, a former Stanford swimmer who sexually assaulted an unconscious woman, began to receive a substantial amount of attention after the survivor released her impact statement to Buzzfeed News (Baker, 2016). In the impact statement, the survivor addressed her perpetrator directly and explained the physical, psychological, and emotional impact that the assault had had on her. The general public has access to victim impact statements shared through media outlets, similarly to the story that participants read in this study. The results of this study, which indicate little changes in victim-blaming behaviors, are unfortunate when one thinks about how readers react to victim impact statements, such as the young woman who survived the sexual assault from Turner. Unfortunately, these impact statements are becoming more common (e.g., Johnson, 2018; Levenson & Cooper, 2018; Rowlings, 2018), but are the public's attitudes about survivors becoming more forgiving? The results of the current study indicate that they may not be.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are a number of limitations to address in the current study. The first category of limitations involves the participants that were recruited. Although the final number of participants used (N = 176) was reasonable to randomly divide between one of the independent variables, (i.e., depiction of the survivor), the biological sex of the message recipients was predominantly female. This aspect of the sample could have impacted the final results when

examining the interaction effect between the two independent variables. In future research, more even distribution of the participants based on biological sex should be enforced.

A second aspect of limitations involves the measures used in the study. First, the blame-placement measures were meant to have three items each; in addition to asking for how much the participants would blame the victim/perpetrator, and the behavior of the victim/perpetrator, the researcher had planned to include an item asking participants how much the character of the victim/perpetrator was to blame in situations involving sexual assault. Because of an error in developing the Qualtrics survey, the character items had to be dropped from the final analysis. Originally, the researcher wanted to include questions to address all three of these concepts based on the investigation done by Anderson (1999), where participants were asked to report their opinions regarding a survivor of sexual assault in terms of characterological attributions (i.e., the survivor's character or personality) and behavioral attributions (i.e., the survivor being more aware of the situation prior to being assaulted). Furthermore, in running the MANCOVA test, it was found that the perpetrator blame index did not meet the assumption of homogeneity of variance according to Levene's test of equality of variance (Field, 2018). Because of this, the results involving the perpetrator blame index may not be entirely reliable.

In future research, the blame-placement measures should be changed. Many DAT studies of sexual assault (Gilmartin-Zena, 1983; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Jones & Aronson, 1973; Key & Ridge, 2011; Kristiansen & Guilietti, 1990) involve participants reading a vignette of an assault before being asked to report their personal and situational relevance. In order to gauge how parasocial contact with a survivor may mitigate victim-blaming behaviors, conducting a two-part study may be more effective. In the first part of the study, participants will be exposed to a portrayal of a sexual assault survivor and report homophily and social distance, and in the

second part they will read a vignette of an assault. Participants would be asked to report their blame-placement on the survivor and the perpetrator involved in the vignette. In the current study, participants were asked their opinion of where they place blame in situations involving sexual assault; because these questions were vague, it may have impacted the final results.

The third and final limitation of the current study involves the survivor depiction manipulation. While there were significant main effects of biological sex of the observer on social distance, there were no significant main effects of biological sex of the media figure. This could be due to an insufficient manipulation, where participants read a short newspaper article of a survivor's story of coping with their assault. Many parasocial contact studies in the past have involved exposure to TV shows or videos (Pan & Zeng, 2018; Schiappa et al., 2005), which may be a more effective alternative. Researchers in the PCH literature have not established which type of media is the most effective in spurring the mechanism underlying prejudice-reduction, which researchers should address in the future. As the original PCH study (Schiappa et al., 2005) examined how exposure to outgroup characters via TV exposure impacted prejudicial attitudes (see Study 1 and 3), this may indicate that parasocial contact with a character via video may yield more robust relationships. In future research, two different manipulations should be used. A manipulation similar to the current study (i.e., reading a newspaper article) as well as a video showing a survivor who is coping with their assault would be used to induce parasocial contact. In addition to improving the current results, it may also help to determine which media outlet is the most effective when investigating parasocial contact.

A possible direction in studying victim-blaming tendencies is examining how different types of linguistic agency used in the media affects perceptions of blame and responsibility. Coverage of sexual assaults typically do not cast a favorable light on the survivor; the media

usually ends up assigning blame by covering the actions, character, and sexual history of the survivor (Serisier, 2017). A possible solution to this problematic coverage may be manipulating linguistic agency in cases involving sexual assault. Manipulating linguistic agency involves changing nouns, verbs, or type of voice (i.e., passive versus active) to impact attitudes (McGlone & Glowacki, 2018). For example, researchers have found a greater change in attitudes when describing actors positively as opposed to activities (i.e., focusing on bankers instead of banking; McGlone & Glowacki, 2018). Additionally, individuals tend to endorse vaccine efficacy more after reading a message where agency is assigned to the virus (i.e., "HPV can take advantage of a single act of unprotected intercourse") as opposed to assigning agency to humans (i.e., "People can contract HPV in a single act of unprotected intercourse"; Bell, McGlone, & Dragojevic, 2014). In relation to sexual assault, for example, attitudes of message recipients may differ based on exposure to a news headline using passive voice (e.g., "A Woman Was Raped Today") compared to using active voice (e.g., "A Man Raped A Woman"). Past research (Henley & Miller, 1995) has found that news stories involving both sexual and nonsexual acts of violence of males on females uses passive voice, failing to identify a responsible actor. It is possible that manipulating different types of linguistic agency may affect perceptions of sexual assault survivors, and perceptions of sexual assault in general.

Conclusion

In light of a recent study done by the CDC (2018), sexual assault is experienced by a startling number of individuals in their lifetime, who report a myriad of physical and mental ailments as a result. Although national discussions surrounding consent and assault have become more prevalent since the rise of the MeToo movement (Bennett, 2017), the statistics still stand. This study was conducted with the intent to discover an avenue through which homophily can be

established between males, who tend to perpetrate sexual violence the most (CDC, 2018), and sexual assault survivors. By establishing personal and situational relevance through parasocial contact with a male sexual assault survivor, it was predicted that males would blame survivors of assault less by way of judgmental leniency. Parasocial contact, which has been cited to increase perspective-taking and reduce stigma, was also utilized as a way to minimize the psychological distance that males may feel towards survivors. Although the results did not provide consistent support for the hypothesized relationships, there are promising directions indicated for future research to explore, and there is still much work to be done on the topic of sexual assault and victim-blaming.

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Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations between Variables

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Relationship with Survivors	0.39	0.49	--				
2. Experience with Assault	0.19	0.39	-0.24***	--			
3. Homophily[a]	.00	1.00	-0.13	0.25***	--		
4. Social Distance (survivors)[a]	.00	.99	-0.19*	0.13	0.28***	--	
5. Victim-Blaming[a]	.00	1.00	0.20**	-0.11	-0.16*	-0.24***	--
6. Perpetrator-Blaming[a]	.00	1.00	-0.18*	0.09	0.19*	0.74***	-0.34***

Note. $N = 176$.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$
[a] This index was formed by saving first unrotated principal component.

Appendix A - Short Story Script (Male)

The news article that you will be reading today was written by a man named **Landon.** On the following page, you will be reading a short story about recent experiences in his life that was published in a major news outlet. **Landon** is in his early-20's and is attending a four-year University in the state of Oklahoma. **Trigger warning: Landon** will be discussing his experience with sexual assault. If you find that this is a sensitive topic for you, you can stop your participation in this study at any time.

As you move to the next page, please be aware that you will not be able to proceed to the rest of the survey until 3 minutes and 30 seconds have passed. Later in the survey, you will be asked questions about the news article that require your critical consideration of the message.

This is the story of my life falling apart, my journey in putting it back together, and my attempt to use my story to change the way that we approach the topic. There's no nice way to put this, but about two years ago, I was raped. At four o'clock in the morning, I found myself walking the streets of Oklahoma City in a part of the city that I had never seen before. I was lost, I couldn't reach my friends, and no cabs were answering. I was alone, and I felt numb. After walking for over an hour, my phone rang, and it was a friend. They asked me what was wrong, but I couldn't bring myself to say it. This paralyzing, mental numbness that would come to control my life for the next two years wouldn't let me, so I instead replied with a vague indication that my night hadn't gone as planned. With that said, my friend likely thought I was drunk and suggested I get to bed. Eventually, I arrived home just as the sun was coming up. I went to my bedroom and decided to get some sleep in the hopes that going to sleep would erase the night from my head. But when I closed my eyes, I realized that these horrifying memories were not going away.

This very bed became my safe space, or my hideaway. It was removed from reality that I still couldn't face. The bed remained my home as I tried to forget what had happened and as I experienced a new pain, a pain unlike any physical or mental pain that I had experienced before. I cut myself off from the outside world. I stopped seeing friends and communicating with my loved ones. I became deeply apathetic towards everything in my life: school, friends, family, nothing mattered to me anymore. I stopped caring for myself in many ways; by the end of my second year of college, I had dropped about 50 pounds. I either found myself without an appetite, or actually lacking any motivation to eat. But most of all, I had convinced myself that I didn't deserve food. How could I when I had just been lying in bed all day?

Despite the fact that my life was falling apart, the people around me didn't notice much of a difference. To an observer, my behavior wasn't actually that unusual. I think we all know someone that might drink multiple times a week, or maybe they sleep too much, or maybe you know someone whose become apathetic and uncommitted. We often see these things as normal because they are such common coping behaviors of University students. My struggles were compounded by what felt like this constant and deep pressure looming over my head. This pressure was the result of an image that I had of myself as a "guy's guy," and the people around me had come to know me by this identity too.

My years leading sports teams, competing in weightlifting, and working on an oil rig became these unique barriers to getting the help that at this point I desperately needed. We tend to think of men as both physically and emotionally strong: physically strong enough to deter or resist an unwanted sexual advance, and emotionally strong enough to maintain composure even in the most damaging and hurtful of circumstances. If I wasn't strong enough to do either one of these things, I questioned whether I was the man that I always thought that I was. Instead of

seeking help and support from my loved ones, I turned my back on them. I became angry, aggressive, and unreachable. Eventually, this new extreme behavior of mine no longer went unnoticed and these very people began to push away.

As the months passed, this numbness, anger, and deep depression that had come to take over my life slowly began to give way. I started to feel like myself again and began returning to the social circles that I had previously abandoned. Although I was slowly but surely recovering, I still denied the event in my head and had actually, in this weird way, convinced myself that the rape had never even happened. One night, about a year after the incident, I went out with friends drinking more than I should've. I drank that night as a means from disassociating myself from the reality that I couldn't face. On this night, I chose to do something I had long wanted to do, and I made my first call for help. I reached out to what was now my former partner of four years and told them as the first person that I had been raped. A short time later, I made my next call for help when I reached out to a counselor. This time, I had attended the session after previously canceling, but I was unable to tell them exactly what had happened, so I left feeling unsatisfied, helpless, and just as desperate as before.

My next attempt to call for help was when I considered pursuing legal action against the people who had raped me. I thought to myself, "This could provide me with some closure, or allow me to feel that I had finally done something to lift myself from the mess that was now my life." However, my mind quickly became clouded with the images of these people staring across from me in the courtroom; their word against mine. What if the judges and others thought I was lying? Why would I only bring something to court months after it had happened? I thought that my image as a hypermasculine male would surely fall apart as the people that knew me found out what had happened to me, and I questioned if I would be blamed for my own rape. Lastly, I

considered the statistics. In America, out of 1000 rapes that occur and are reported to police, only five of these rapists will be convicted. I thought that if a young woman is so often unable to convict their male abuser, that I would surely have no chance. It was pointless, the risks too high and the benefits just too low.

Today, I write to you as a survivor that is still trying to put together the pieces almost two years later. I have made strides in some areas, but I continue to face challenges in many others. After missteps with counseling and deciding not to pursue legal action against the people who had hurt me, I decided to try a new avenue and I decided to try to share my experiences as an attempt to heal. The first step in this process was writing an article for a University paper on my campus. I thought it would allow me to share my story, hopefully support other survivors, and use it as an opportunity to advocate for better resources for people like me on my campus. The article received an overwhelmingly positive response. It showed to me that there was a community that wanted to support me that I didn't know existed before and that people's perceptions of me wouldn't be changed as a male survivor.

I also learned that my story resonated with other survivors, and people who hadn't experienced sexual assault were better able to understand and empathize with people like me. While many survivors or people who experience traumatic events may not find publicly sharing, or discussing, their experiences the best way to heal, for me this was a key step in my healing. In fact, recently my life has brightened. I found medication which works for me, I found friends that make me feel loved and supported, and I have begun to actually spend time with my loved ones and friends once again. And perhaps most importantly, I'm excited about what the future holds, and I feel confident that I can, and will, make the most out of it.

Appendix B - Short Story Script (Female)

The news article that you will be reading today was written by a woman named **Lindsey**. On the following page, you will be reading a short story about recent experiences in her life that was published in a major news outlet. **Lindsey** is in her early-20's and is attending a four-year University in the state of Oklahoma. **Trigger warning: Lindsey** will be discussing her experience with sexual assault. If you find that this is a sensitive topic for you, you can stop your participation in this study at any time.

As you move to the next page, please be aware that you will not be able to proceed to the rest of the survey until 3 minutes and 30 seconds have passed. Later in the survey, you will be asked questions about the news article that require your critical consideration of the message.

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My years leading sports teams, competing in school, and working hard for what I had, became these unique barriers to getting the help that at this point I desperately needed. We tend to expect women to be strong: physically strong enough to deter or resist an unwanted sexual advance, and emotionally strong enough to maintain composure even in the most damaging and hurtful of circumstances. If I wasn't strong enough to do either one of these things, I questioned whether I was the strong person that I always thought that I was. Instead of seeking help and

support from my loved ones, I turned my back on them. I became angry, aggressive, and unreachable. Eventually, this new extreme behavior of mine no longer went unnoticed and these very people began to push away.

As the months passed, this numbness, anger, and deep depression that had come to take over my life slowly began to give way. I started to feel like myself again and began returning to the social circles that I had previously abandoned. Although I was slowly but surely recovering, I still denied the event in my head and had actually, in this weird way, convinced myself that the rape had never even happened. One night, about a year after the incident, I went out with friends drinking more than I should've. I drank that night as a means from disassociating myself from the reality that I couldn't face. On this night, I chose to do something I had long wanted to do, and I made my first call for help. I reached out to what was now my former partner of four years and told them, as the first person, that I had been raped. A short time later, I made my next call for help when I reached out to a counselor. This time, I had attended the session after previously canceling, but I was unable to tell them exactly what had happened, so I left feeling unsatisfied, helpless, and just as desperate as before.

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Lastly, I considered the statistics. In America, out of 1000 rapes that occur and are reported to police, only five of these rapists will be convicted. I thought that if a young woman is so often unable to convict their male abuser, that I would surely have no chance. It was pointless, the risks too high and the benefits just too low.

Today, I write to you as a survivor that is still trying to put together the pieces almost two years later. I have made strides in some areas, but I continue to face challenges in many others. After missteps with counseling and deciding not to pursue legal action against the people who had hurt me, I decided to try a new avenue and I decided to try to share my experiences as an attempt to heal. The first step in this process was writing an article for a University paper on my campus. I thought it would allow me to share my story, hopefully support other survivors, and use it as an opportunity to advocate for better resources for people like me on my campus. The article received an overwhelmingly positive response. It showed to me that there was a community that wanted to support me that I didn't know existed before and that people's perceptions of me wouldn't be changed as a sexual assault survivor.

I also learned that my story resonated with other survivors, and people who hadn't experienced sexual assault were better able to understand and empathize with people like me. While many survivors or people who experience traumatic events may not find publicly sharing, or discussing, their experiences the best way to heal, for me this was a key step in my healing. In fact, recently my life has brightened. I found medication which works for me, I found friends that make me feel loved and supported, and I have begun to actually spend time with my loved ones and friends once again. And perhaps most importantly, I'm excited about what the future holds, and I feel confident that I can, and will, make the most out of it.

Appendix C - Attitude Homophily Index

Using the type of scale that was described earlier, answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Put the number that indicates your level of agreement regarding each statement. **Remember, you can list any number from zero to infinity.** For the next set of questions, you will be giving your opinion of **Landon/Lindsey**, the author of the news article that you read earlier.

1. Landon/Lindsey thinks like me
2. Landon/Lindsey behaves like me
3. Landon/Lindsey shares my values
4. Landon/Lindsey is like me
5. Landon/Lindsey treats people like I do
6. Landon/Lindsey has thoughts and ideas that are similar to mine
7. Landon/Lindsey expresses attitudes similar to mine
8. Landon/Lindsey has a lot in common with me

Appendix D – Social Distance Index

Using the type of scale that was described earlier, answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Put the number that indicates your level of agreement regarding each statement. **Remember, you can list any number from zero to infinity.**

For the next set of questions, you will be giving your opinion of sexual assault survivors. Sexual assault survivors can be defined as individuals who have experienced sexual violence or abuse. Survivors can be any sex or identify as any gender. Remember that all of your answers will remain anonymous.

If given the opportunity, would you:

1. Marry a sexual assault survivor?
2. Have an intimate relation with a sexual assault survivor?
3. Accept a sexual assault survivor as a family member through marriage?
4. Have a sexual assault survivor as a close friend?
5. Confide in a sexual assault survivor?
6. Accept a sexual assault survivor as a neighbor?
7. Have a sexual assault survivor visit your home?
8. Visit a sexual assault survivor in their home?
9. Have a sexual assault survivor as a work colleague?
10. Have a sexual assault survivor as a casual acquaintance?
11. Accept a sexual assault survivor as one's boss?
12. Attend a cultural activity sponsored by a sexual assault survivor organization?

Appendix E – Blame/Responsibility Placement Items

Using the type of scale that was described earlier, answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Put the number that indicates your level of agreement regarding each statement. **Remember, you can list any number from zero to infinity.**

For the next set of questions, you will be giving your opinion regarding situations surrounding sexual assault; more specifically, the perpetrators of the assault (or who commits to the assault), and the survivors of the assault. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. Remember that all of your answers will remain anonymous.

1. I think that in situations involving sexual assault, it is appropriate to blame the perpetrator for the outcome
2. I think that in situations involving sexual assault, it is appropriate to blame the survivor for the outcome
3. I think that in situations involving sexual assault, it is appropriate to blame the behavior of the perpetrator for the outcome
4. I think that in situations involving sexual assault, it is appropriate to blame the behavior of the survivor for the outcome