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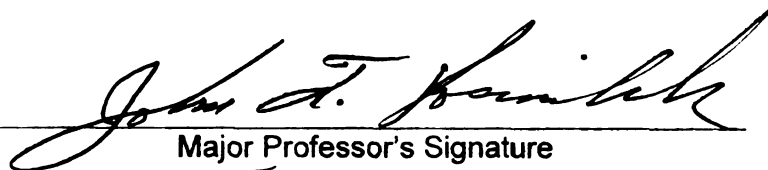
A STUDY OF DEFENSIVE ATTRIBUTION:  
MEASURING THE EFFECTS OF MEDIA BIAS

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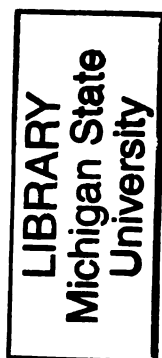
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**A STUDY OF DEFENSIVE ATTRIBUTION:  
MEASURING THE EFFECTS OF MEDIA BIAS**

**By**

**Jameson Christopher Lontz**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
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for the degree of**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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## **Abstract**

### **A STUDY OF DEFENSIVE ATTRIBUTION: MEASURING THE EFFECTS OF MEDIA BIAS**

**By**

**Jameson Christopher Lontz**

Numerous empirical publications maintain the sentiment that biased media affects consumers. The present study explored cognitions of participants by manipulating a news story in a way that influenced affect, and subsequent attributions. This study investigated the degree to which media significantly influences emotion and leads to defensive attribution. Biased media reports may cloud perceived knowledge, thus influencing self-government, relationship variables, opinion of mental health services, and general understanding of imparted information. All such outcomes call for psychologists and other professionals to intervene within their respective policy, clinical, counseling, and consulting settings where the results of the present study are applicable.

Participants consisted of 625 randomly assigned students solicited from undergraduate social sciences courses at three universities: 1) A small, private, Jesuit university in the Northwest U.S.; 2) A large, public university in the Midwest U.S.; 3) A large, public university in the Southeast U.S. In this web-based study, participants read a news story of a crime that was committed and were then asked to attribute degree of blame to characters in the report. That is, degree of defensive attribution was measured. A measure of defensive attribution was based on H.H. Kelley's (1973) attribution theory. It was postulated that a news story which was subtly manipulated so as to have the victim appear less virtuous would result in a higher degree of the victim being blamed for the crime. Participants' emotional response to characters in the news story was associated

with defensive attribution. Implications of findings as well as future research directions are discussed.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my mom, Vicki. It is with her bequest moral lessons of honesty, dedication, and hard work as well as stubbornness to no end that I attain every goal.

I dedicate this project to my wife, Angel. Without objection, Angel has encouraged and supported every emotion along this challenging journey as we pursue our goals.

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Finally, I am indebted to all members of my family for encouraging me to remember humble beginnings in the pursuit of every lofty endeavor.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Myriad results indicate effects of bias in media. Price, Tewksbury, and Powers (1997) explored the effects of journal articles on the thoughts and feelings of readers. Price et al. randomly assigned 278 student participants in two studies to read one of four versions of a journal article. The first study found that type of journal article read significantly influenced which details readers focused on. Type of article also affected how readers evaluated topical information. The second study concluded that journal articles could affect decision making in regards to public policy. McClure, Lalljee, and Jaspars (1991) studied the effect of extremity of an event on number of causal explanations given for that event. Twenty participants evaluated events involving real as well as fictitious characters. Three studies used both unstructured and structured questionnaires to measure variables. The first two studies showed that some extreme events were attributed a single cause and other events were attributed a conglomerate of less extreme causes. The third study found that participants negatively correlated the number of causes with the extremity of an event. That is, the more extreme an event, the fewer causal explanations were attributed to that event. Therefore, according to McClure et al. (1991), the way in which information is presented affects how consumers explain an event.

Daschmann (2000) explored a similar vein. Daschmann hypothesized that poll data influences what voters believe about the distribution of opinions less than media presentations of testimonials. That is, testimonials are more likely than poll data to impact voters' perception of who will win an election. Daschmann asked 274

participants to read a newspaper story about poll results and voter statements.

Participants' perceived climate of opinion, personal opinion, and voting intentions were measured. Testimonials influenced perceived climate of opinion and personal opinion, but did not affect voting intentions.

The 2004 presidential election illuminates another example of how the modality by which information is disseminated may affect consumers. Leading up to the election, many television stations broadcast animated maps that reflect red and blue states. However, Maria Price, Ph.D., George Washington University associate professor and geography department chair, indicates that a county-by-county map makes the country appear more homogenous in its opinion than a state-by-state one (Bailey, 2005). This could be misleading because similarities between American voters may outnumber differences (Law, 2005).

Willnat, He, Takeshita, and Lopez-Escobar (2002) investigated the degree to which 1,968 Asian and European student participants believe that United States media affects their culture. Participants were asked about their level of U.S. media consumption as well as how much they believe exposure to U.S. Media influences them and others. Most Asian participants reported believing they are positively influenced, in general, by U.S. media. Most European participants reported believing, in general, that they are negatively influenced by U.S. media. All participants reported that violence in U.S. media is a negative influence on the cultural values of themselves and others. Most European participants reported holding the belief that U.S. media influences other cultures more than European cultures. Most Asian participants held the conviction that U.S. media influences the cultural values of Asians to a higher degree than other cultures.



Overall, most participants in Willnat et al's (2002) study indicated the perception that violence in U.S. media is a stronger influence on others than on themselves.

### Statement of Problem

While myriad results do indicate effects of bias in media, the literature does not speak directly to implications for the practice of psychology. The problem is that biased media reports may cloud perceived knowledge, thus influencing self-government, relationship variables, opinion of mental health services, and general understanding of imparted information. All such outcomes call for psychologists and other professionals to intervene within their respective policy, clinical, counseling, and consulting settings where the results of the present study are applicable.

Participants were randomly assigned students solicited from undergraduate social sciences courses at 1) A small (approximately 6,100 students in 2004), private, Jesuit, university in the Northwest U.S.; 2) A large (approximately 44,800 students in 2004), public, AAU (Association of the 62 leading research universities in America) university in the Midwest U.S.; and, 3) A large (approximately 48,000 students in 2004), public, AAU university in the Southeast U.S. An email explaining the study was sent to instructors of the courses being solicited. The email asked approving instructors to forward the solicitation email to their class lists. There was a web-link in this email by which participants then accessed participation in the study. The email described how participants visit a website and complete questionnaires for a study that is being conducted.

Sampling from these geographically diverse populations provides greater external validity. More geographically diverse samples may provide racial diversity between

participant samples, thus leading to more multicultural implications of results. Results of a study completed by Lontz (2004) produced face validity and construct validity for the measures used. Lontz hypothesized that changes in the verbiage of a news story would influence participants' emotions and predict defensive attribution. The questionnaires created by Lontz appeared valid, and hypotheses were supported. That is, Lontz (2004) found that a biased media report predicts an increased degree of defensive attribution. In other words, participants were more likely to blame the victim of a crime when that victim was subtly made to appear less virtuous.

The present study employed a web-based methodology. Participants visited an internet website and then completed questionnaires which produced data for this study. Findings from internet methodology are consistent with findings from traditional methodology (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). Online participants have the freedom to withdraw at any time without the pressure to conform that may be present in person. Additional benefits of online methodology include: Increased ability to gather participants beyond traditional reaches, and thus increase sample sizes; increased efficiency in data collection; removal of the data entry process; low expense; and, increased diversity (e.g., gender) of samples. Further, in contrast to other assertions (e.g., Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukophadhyay, & Scherlis, 1998), internet users are found to be no different in adjustment and depression from non-internet-users. Internet methodology also acts as a motivating agent for eliciting the participation of frequent users of the internet (Gosling et al., 2004). Internet-based assessment can be far-reaching, enabling researchers to gather data from people with disabilities who might otherwise be discouraged from participation. Further, those individuals who do not speak

English as a first language or whose cultural diversity precludes them from participating now have an alternative for inclusion (Naglieri, Drasgow, Schmit, Handler, Prifitera, Margolis, & Velasquez, 2004). By taking special precaution to consider its limitations, online methodology has great potential in the world of research.

### Purpose of the Study

The present study hypothesized that bias in wording influences perception, and that these thoughts lead to an emotional reaction by consumers. This study investigated the degree to which media significantly influences emotion and leads to defensive attribution, that is, blaming of the victim. A measure of defensive attribution is driven by Kelley's (1973) articulation of attribution theory. The most salient implication of the proposed study is that results, when communicated to consumers, may produce awareness of one's attributions and awareness of the source of attributions (i.e., thoughts→feelings→attributions). That is, how does one explain events, and what is the source of one's explanatory style? Further, results will add to mental health literature that addresses some of the stigma related to mental health services. Results can inform both media and laypeople about the influence of biased media. Imparted information can lead to reduced defensive attribution by consumers. In practice, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health providers can help guide clients toward awareness of their own attributions. For example, therapists can help clients identify problem areas, such as how attributions about self and others could be more positive and informed so as to identify means of change.

It has been postulated that the fashion by which information is imparted has consequences of astounding effect on consumers (e.g., Rule & Ferguson, 1986).

Perceived characteristics of the person who conveys information are also influential (Dholakia & Sternthal, 1977; Rule & Ferguson, 1986). Specific wording also impacts consumers. McClure, Allen, and Walkey (2001) found that participants gave varied explanations as to why a building was destroyed during an earthquake based upon wording of the news report. That is, participant explanations depended on whether the building was reported to have been destroyed because of poor building design, lack of human preparedness, or the magnitude of the earthquake.

There is cogent evidence that the impact on some individuals will be different from the impact on others. Specifically, children are more susceptible to media's technique of ambiguous statements and underlying messages (Dittman, 2004). Violence in media may foster aggression, indifference to violence, or even antisocial behavior (Berkowitz, 1984). Scenarios in which aggression is somehow rewarded, for example, the bad guy gets away, teach children to be aggressive (Center for Communication, 1998).

The fashion by which media presents information also impacts self-perceived knowledge. For example, a biased media report can affect one's thoughts and lead to inaccurate assumptions regarding a particular political issue (e.g., Park, 2001; Daschmann, 2000; Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997). Further, the agenda of a particular media source can sway opinion. Given that negative information makes up approximately 60% of what is stored in memory (P.B. Pedersen, personal communication, November 7, 2003), a negative interpretation of, for example, a political figure will elicit attributions accordingly. The agenda of a news reporter can mislead the

lay person on important issues. Rondeau (2003) implies a negative connotation in use of the term *treatment* when distinguishing it from *counseling* (Lontz, 2004).

For the purposes of this study, it is appropriate to assume that programmed bias in media does influence consumers in some ways. Biased media is defined here as that media which has a planned agenda in its presentation as shown by a distinct difference in wording. An example of biased media is given by the news story for this study. The present problem is that biased media reports are manipulated so as to cloud perceived knowledge, thus influencing self-government, relationship variables, opinion of mental health services, and general understanding of imparted information. The product of this manipulation calls for intervention by psychologists and other mental health professionals.

Participants in this web-based study visited a website where they read a news story of a crime that was committed (Appendix B). Participants were then asked to attribute degree of blame to each of the characters in the news story (Appendix E). It was hypothesized that specific wording differences in the news story would impact emotional responses to the information and result in increased defensive attribution, or blaming the victim.

- $H_1$ : A news story that is high in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency will increase defensive attribution ( $\mu_1 - \mu_2 \neq 0$ ).
- $H_2$ : There is a significant negative correlation between defensive attribution and approval of characters in a news story that differs in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency ( $R < 0$ ).

## Definition of Terms

- 1) Attribution: A causal explanation
- 2) Defensive Attribution: Blaming the victim
  - a. Defensive attribution occurs when the attributor erroneously explains an event as being entirely due to (or the fault of) the person who is directly affected by the event. This phenomenon is an attribution error which fails to consider all of the situational details. The result is unjust blaming of the victim for something that is not entirely within the victim's control.
  - b. Defensive attribution is **not** blaming in the case of a clear cause-effect relationship between an individual's actions and **intended** consequences. For example, blaming a person for getting high, after taking a drug with the intention of getting high, is **not** defensive attribution. Blaming the same person for overdosing is defensive attribution; overdosing is an uninvited adverse consequence. Automobile accidents, misfortune due to natural disasters, and crimes may often be attributed to individuals who do not have full control over the situation. Defensive attribution is a failure to consider all contributing factors that may lead up to an event. Defensive attribution is **not** describing what happened; it **is** an erroneous interpretation of why something happened.
- 3) Biased Media: That which has a planned agenda in its presentation as shown by a distinct difference in wording

## Chapter 2

### Review of Literature

The present study applied Kelley's (1973) augmentation principle, which is otherwise known as blaming the victim with a values-based judgment. This study investigated the degree to which a bias in media significantly influences emotion and leads to defensive attribution. A measure of defensive attribution was based on Kelley's (1973) articulation of attribution theory. The purposes of this investigation were to: 1) determine whether bias in media influences emotions, and 2) measure the degree to which emotions influenced by biased media lead to defensive attribution.

The following is a concise review of relevant literature. A complete but parsimonious explanation of Kelley's (1973) articulation of attribution theory is followed by additional relevant literature. Bias in media is explored chronologically in ascending order by type of media: 1) Pre-1980 written media, radio-, and television-broadcasts, 2) 1981 to 1990 written media, radio-, and television-broadcasts, and 3) 1991 to Present written media, radio-, and television-broadcasts. Given the contemporary emphasis of this literature review, the reader will become well informed as to how Kelley's theory applies to bias in media. Following a synopsis of Kelley's theory, the first two sections of the literature review (i.e., Pre-1980, and 1981 to 1990) combine literature from written, radio-, and television-broadcast media. The final section (1991 to Present) discusses each of these genres in turn.

### Attribution Theory

Attribution theory is primarily concerned with exploring why things happen. The theory incorporates both the information used and what is done with this knowledge to

determine causation. H.H. Kelley (1973) uses the term “psychological epistemology” in speaking to the process where a person both “knows his world” and “knows what he knows.” This process is regarded as true introspection of causal attributions. Kelley posits that “it is precisely common sense with which attribution theory is concerned” (p. 107). The following section is a succinct explanation of the key constructs in Kelley’s theory.

Attribution theory (Kelley, 1973) posits that a three part interaction transpires when attribution, that is, a causal explanation, occurs in a given situation. This three part interaction is made up of *Person* (i.e., idiosyncratic variables), *Entity* (i.e., subject of the interaction), and *Time* (i.e., circumstantial factors). For example, a man (the person) might admire a painting (entity) in a gallery of several paintings (time). Qualities within the person, something about the painting, or the man’s surroundings, i.e., the gallery and other people present, determine why the man chooses that one painting to admire. Further, and more complex, collaboration of all three, i.e., PersonXEntityXTime, may provide an explanation. Within this triadic perspective, the sub-constructs of *Distinctiveness*, *Consensus*, and *Consistency* determine to what one attributes the outcome of a situation.

Distinctiveness measures how closely associated one’s attribution is to a stimulus. For example, a measure of distinctiveness would determine how closely one’s explanation of why a house was destroyed during a hurricane is related to *the force of the hurricane* (i.e., the stimulus). Distinctiveness is also a matter of selectivity, which leads to attributions of preventability. For example, was the house exclusively destroyed, or were all houses in the area destroyed? Consensus, on the other hand, is a phenomenon



indicating that one is more confident about his or her attributions when that decision is supported by others. That is, when others make the same attribution, or when the individual believes others will make the same attribution, there is more confidence in one's causal explanation. Consensus may also be fostered by expert opinion (or some model perceived as an expert). For example, a forensic psychologist in a criminal law trial may be viewed as an expert by jurors. A measure of consistency determines the frequency with which distinctiveness and consensus of information occurs over time. For instance, it may be *known* (italics added) by most people that all houses in the direct path of a hurricane are usually destroyed. Degrees of distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency vary depending on how information is presented. According to Kelley's theory, validity in attribution requires simultaneous consideration of distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency. That is to say, in order to accurately measure reasons for an individual's interest in a painting, for example, the researcher will analyze person, entity, time, distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency as potential influences.

Additional concepts in the theory include the discounting principle and the augmentation principle. The discounting principle states that the cause given for an effect may be discounted with the presence of other feasible causes. For example, a crime against some antagonist may be unjustifiably attributed to his or her personal qualities. This example introduces the augmentation principle in which action is more likely attributed to the actor when "constraints, costs, sacrifices, or risks" (Kelley, 1973) are involved in the action. For example, if a prostitute is reportedly assaulted, consumers of this news may attribute the crime to the actions and decisions of the prostitute. Personal variables and *wrong place at the wrong time* factors are often ambiguous and

therefore difficult for the consumer to ascertain. This can result in defensive attribution by the lay consumer. In sum, Kelley's attribution theory carries the theme that causal inferences reflect mindful (and sometimes mindless) consideration of multiple causes for an effect. However, Kelley writes about certain attribution errors that may occur. For instance, actors in a given situation may attribute their actions to situational factors and the actions of others to unique and specific personal factors (Ross, 1977, as cited in Weiten & Lloyd, 2003). This may be due to the predication by some individuals that victims deserve misfortune if undesirable characteristics are present or poor choices are made by the victim (Lerner, 1980). This phenomenon also serves individuals in that it enables denial of one's own potential victimization (Lambert, Burroughs, & Nguyen, 1999). Another theme of Kelley's writings is gleaned with a quote once recorded by the Roman known as Virgil, "Happy is he who has been able to perceive the causes of things" (p. 127).

#### Origins of Defensive Attribution

According to Wilhelm Wundt, psychologists are to study the psychological processes by which we experience and observe the external world (Hothersall, 2004, p. 123). Although it may seem commonplace, an explanation of defensive attribution and the psychological processes that motivate this phenomenon is useful here. To articulate an exact origin of defensive attribution would be overly bold, given the various cultural factors that influence one's explanatory style. However, some underlying processes are worth exploring. In particular, the concepts of defensiveness and locus of control are meaningful here.

This dissection of defensive attribution includes a definition followed by complexities that contribute to the concept. Weiten and Lloyd (2003) discuss defensive attribution in terms of, “a tendency to blame victims for their misfortune so that one feels less likely to be blamed in a similar way” (p. 159). Examples include blaming victims of domestic violence or even rape for their apparent lack of motivation to either leave or avoid such harmful situations. Breaking down defensive attribution to defensiveness alone reveals an attempt by the individual to shield oneself from pain. This may include reacting to save face or when feeling threatened interpersonally, such as when feeling belittled (p. 197).

Aside from constructs that may provoke a defensive response, there may be further underlying factors. Carl Rogers articulates defensiveness in terms of the reaction to a situation where self-concept is threatened (Weiten & Lloyd, 2003). When there is incongruence between one’s self-concept and how others view that person, the result is anxiety for that person. For example, the individual who is reacting defensively will go so far as to “...ignore, deny, and twist reality” (p. 48) to maintain their view of self and to avoid the inevitable anxiety that is produced by acknowledging lack of personal virtue. Engebretson, Clark, Niaura, Phillips, Albrecht, and Tilkemeier (1999) found that patients who left a cardiac rehabilitation program prematurely were more likely to exhibit higher levels of anxiety and defensiveness, to be younger, and to perceive themselves as healthier. Kraemer, Salisbury, and Spielman (1998) found that defensiveness, among other traits, was not predictive of treatment completion among juveniles in a sex offender treatment program. Rogers, along with Abraham Maslow, analyzes defensiveness even deeper by emphasizing that the roots of congruence lie in one’s sense of personal worth.

Personal worth may be affected by locus of control, which may be affected by one's self esteem (Weiten & Lloyd, 2003).

Blatier (2000) describes a positive correlation between locus of control and type of prison sentence. Blatier found that those prisoners who served their sentence at a site outside of the actual prison had a more internal locus of control compared to those prisoners who served their sentence inside of the prison. That is, the study found that prisoners who served their sentence outside of the actual prison were more likely to see themselves in control of their crimes. In other words, rather than blaming the victim, judicial system, or some other entity for their being in prison, prisoners who served their sentence outside of the actual prison took more responsibility for their crimes. Hamilton and Akhter (2002) analyze locus of control in terms of effort and ability. However, Hamilton and Akhter assert that ability is uncontrollable and effort is controllable. Therefore, when an individual defensively attributes, they are judging the effort of the victim (i.e., whether the victim tried hard enough) without considering ability (i.e., whether the victim really can try harder).

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory is even more microscopic in its dissection of the concept at hand. Freud's theory (Weiten & Lloyd, 2003) outlines numerous defense mechanisms that are identified to protect an individual from experiencing anxiety and guilt. These defense mechanisms include: *Rationalization* (falsely justifying poor behavior); *Repression* (failing to acknowledge unconscious feelings); *Projection* (attributing interpersonal problems to others); *Displacement* (taking out emotion, often anger, on uninvolved individuals); *Reaction formation* (behavior that is profoundly opposite of one's true feelings); *Regression* (a reversion to childlike behavior in response

to some stressful event or pattern); and, *Identification* (forming an alliance, either made up or real, that brings with it a sense of increased self esteem). Defensiveness may also be used to protect others. Ingram and Hutchinson (1999) found that knowledge of stigma about one's own disposition led mothers who were HIV (human immuno virus) positive to be more defensive of their children. That is, these mothers were increasingly likely to take steps that would prevent their children from contracting HIV because of personal experience with being stigmatized against for having the illness. In returning to a broad-based discussion, Schutz (1998) describes defensiveness in terms of being a self-presentation style. Further, Schutz sees this presentation style as a taxonomy or classification, rather than, more specifically, a trait. With a thorough understanding of attribution theory as well as some of the constructs that impact degree of defensive attributions, this review now turns to additional relevant literature.

### Bias in Media

#### Pre-1980

Kaplan and Sharp (1974) found that participants perceived negatively portrayed characters in a written story as competent and dynamic, yet untrustworthy, compared to characters who unintentionally produced the same outcome. Advertising, the practice of persuasion, often utilizes admirable characters, for example, sports superstars, to sell a product. Dholakia and Sternthal (1977) found the credibility of a source to have an effect on attribution. Dholakia and Sternthal's participants rated high credibility sources as "more trustworthy and expert" than low credibility sources; but, results of perceived attractiveness of the sources were not different between groups. Dholakia and Sternthal

concluded with the suggestion that “attribution of behavior affects people’s feelings about an issue rather than their cognitions or behavioral intentions...” (p. 231).

Eagly, Wood, and Chaiken (1978) contrasted the findings of Dholakia and Sternthal (1977). Eagly et al. (1978) found that participants perceived communicators as less biased when the participants’ expectations of the communicator were not confirmed. Confirmed expectations lead to the perception that communicators were insincere and manipulative. Additionally, Eagly and Chaiken (1975) found that communicators perceived as attractive were more persuasive compared to unattractive communicators. This finding was magnified when communicators advocated undesirable positions. Participants also assumed that communicators with attractive characteristics would more likely advocate desirable positions.

1981 to 1990

Rule and Ferguson (1986) discussed observers’ reactions to aggressive events depending on interpretations. Cognitive interpretations influence moral evaluations and thus attributions. In considering children as observers, not only can media encourage children to use aggression in solving interpersonal problems and produce indifference to violence, but it is also postulated that violent acts on television may cultivate antisocial behavior. Observers may be inclined to aggressive behavior, but this is not inevitable (Berkowitz, 1984). Gulotta (1983) continued in discussion of how attributions by observers of an event are more influenced by their perception of another’s actions rather than overt behavior of the actor. Further, level of anticipation of an event may have an effect on attribution. Unanticipated events may be more likely to elicit snap judgment causal explanations (Hastie, 1984).

In a study of comparative advertising, Gorn and Weinberg (1984) found that perception was most influential on participants' ratings of brand similarity. Therefore, the nature of comparative advertising (i.e., brand X portrayed as better than brand Z) is effective in swaying practical attribution with these products. In another comparison, Gaddy and Tanjong's (1986) review differentiated natural disasters from sociopolitical ones (e.g., crime waves) in terms of attribution. The bestowal of responsibility to the victims of a crime differed significantly from attributions in natural disaster situations. Additional evidence for bias in media is shown by Mulilis and Lippa (1990) who found that participants increased earthquake preparedness when exposed to media that was manipulated so as to have threat of an earthquake be perceived as more probable.

1991 to Present

*Written*

The most contemporary literature continues to voice problems associated with bias in media. However, much salience lies in what media brings the world. Fuller (1996) maintains the necessity (despite all faults) of media by citing Thomas Jefferson: "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter" (pp. 23-24).

McClure's (1998) discussion relates to Kelley's (1973) discounting principle, where McClure proposes that people will discount attributions when another plausible explanation exists. On the other hand, participants will often "anchor" themselves to their initial attribution and essentially dismiss any alternatives. These findings supported McClure, Lalljee, and Jaspars' (1991) finding that participants will increase the

weightiness of a single cause instead of attributing additional causes in the case of extreme effects. However, this contradicted Kelley's finding that extreme effects generate more causes. To reconcile this contradiction, replication of these studies would seem appropriate.

McClure, Walkey, and Allen (1999) hypothesized there to be a difference between low risk-takers with an internal locus of control around a natural disaster in two populations (i.e., students and non-students). Results produced evidence that students perceive earthquake damage as more preventable than non-students, and that non-students indicate more "complex explanations." However, both samples showed a positive correlation between internal locus of control and perceived ability to prevent earthquake damage. Further, distinctive damage (e.g., one building selectively destroyed in a block of several buildings) was rated by participants as more preventable than global damage (i.e., all buildings destroyed). A positive correlation between age and earthquake preparation was found. A negative correlation was found between age and risk-taking.

Willnat, He, Takeshita, and Lopez-Escobar (2002) hypothesized that participants from ten major universities in eight countries (Japan, Indonesia, Hong Kong, China, Spain, Germany, Great Britain, and the Netherlands) would attribute effects of United States media as more influential on others than on themselves. Where most Asian participants indicated positive influences from U.S. media, most European participants indicated that U.S. media has a negative effect on their cultural values. All participants indicated that violence in U.S. media can have a negative effect on self and others; but, influence on cultures outside of the U.S. was perceived as more significant. Further, data from European participants suggested the perception that U.S. media affects cultural



values of other cultures more than U.S. cultures; data from most Asian participants suggested the opposite, especially students from Hong Kong who perceived “very little differences” in U.S. media effect across cultures. Other opinion data includes Daschmann (2000) who found that opinions broadcast by media had a “considerably stronger” effect on poll results than raw poll data that was broadcast. However, none of the media analyzed in Daschmann’s study significantly affected voting intentions. In contrast, poll data may have been affected by another of Daschmann’s findings, that anti-government exemplars were seen as more credible.

Biased media may impact attribution in myriad ways. Regarding the thoughts and feelings of participants, Price, Tewksbury, and Powers (1997) found that written news frames, which did not increase frequency of cognitive responses, affected attributions about the issue in the news frames. The same researchers found that variation in the news frames could affect public policy decisions. According to Price and Tewksbury (1997), important parts of a message will activate ideas leading to certain attributions. These “applicability effects” compel a person to apply the same thoughts and feelings in later decisions, resulting in attributions referred to as “accessibility effects.” That is, it seems as though people can develop an inflexible style of attribution. Further results suggested that news frames, which discuss tuition increases, stimulated somewhat universal thoughts and feelings in students. That is to say, the consensus phenomenon appears to have affected participants in this study. The point here is that even if the specifics of a news story do not necessarily apply to a consumer, the phenomenon of consensus (Kelley, 1973) does.

James and Hensel (1991) conclude with their elaboration on “*Attitude-Toward-the-Ad*” in which it was postulated that affective reactions (i.e., feelings) influence attitudes about products in advertising. Further, considering that negative information makes up approximately 60% of what is stored in memory (P.B. Pedersen, personal communication, November 7, 2003), negative advertising, or any negative information, plays a large role in decision making. The power of media to impress was also exemplified by Dashborough and Ashkanasy’s (2002) review article where they indicated that leadership is: 1) an emotional process modeled by the leaders who influence followers, and 2) a social interaction modus. In short, followers make decisions regarding perceived intentions of leaders. These decisions elicit emotion, and vice versa, which in turn elicits attributions. Dashborough and Ashkanasy pointed out, however, that the ability of followers to accurately interpret leaders’ intentions is subjective.

In accordance with attribution theory, Gotlieb and Sarel (1991) found that when a highly credible source is used in comparative advertising, there is a positive effect on item preference (e.g., images of superstars to sell more sports drinks). On the other hand, when a less credible source, for example, a shifty car salesperson, is paired with a product, the source will be discredited. Shamir (1991) contrasted this by finding that such attribution comes from the group (i.e., consensus) and is not due to credibility of the source.

Along a similar vein, McClure et al. (2001) wanted to find whether biased media contributes to fatalism regarding natural disasters. That is, McClure et al. wanted to know if people believe damage occurring from natural disasters is preventable. The results of four studies found that participants were less likely to prepare for earthquakes

when fatalistic attributions are made. For example, media can present information about an event in a way that makes the event appear inevitable. High consistency and consensus and high distinctiveness, in various conditions presented to participants in newspaper story form, lead to attributions where participants laid blame on building design, and held the belief that damage to buildings ruined during the earthquake was preventable. Along with these findings, there were differences between the age groups sampled. A younger population may be more susceptible to media bias. College student participants made attributions that were affected by both consensus and distinctiveness. Participants from the general public responded to only consensus information when making attributions. Further, all participants made attributions based on consensus alone. That is to say, all participants assumed that other participants would make the same attributions.

### *Radio*

Cooper (1996) nostalgically discusses parental concerns about violence in broadcast media first appearing in 1933. At this time, the “naïveté” of children was thought to make them susceptible to violent programs, and parents protested shows such as “Ether Bogeyman.” In these times, parents were even more weary with television, as it produced “over excitement and nightmares” (p.25) in children. In 1954 the California Youth Authority (CYA) reported a rise in youth crime rates and laid blame on television crime programs. At this time, James Bennett (director of the Bureau of Prisons) spoke in advocacy of television programming, saying that only “unstable...rebellious...unhappy” (p. 29) children would be affected by such programming; but this contention remained a source of debate with the CYA.

During the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson addressed the media with the following remarkable statement:

There is no denying it. You, the broadcast industry, have the enormous power in your hands. You have the power to clarify. And you have the power to confuse...No law and no set of regulations and no words of mine can improve you or dictate your daily responsibility. All I mean to do-what I'm trying to do-is to remind you that where there's great power there must also be great responsibility. This is true for broadcasters just as it's true for Presidents, and seekers for the Presidency (Cooper, 1996, p. 49).

This statement, followed by the assassination of Robert Kennedy, ignited President Johnson's appointment of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, whose purpose was to investigate violence in the United States (Cooper, 1996).

Yanovitzky and Cappella (1999) found that attitudes toward political leaders in the 1996 Presidential election were only slightly influenced by political talk radio (PTR) shows. This study found that pre-existing attitudes about political leaders were more influential; although these results were not mediated by political knowledge. Therefore, Yanovitzky and Cappella concluded that PTR shows have little if any effect on political opinion. Rossler and Schenk (2000), however, found that, although media effects proved moderate in general, participants with a high need for persuasive messages were affected. Further, Rossler and Schenk found a prevalence of similar opinion among communication networks. Broadcasts of current events also suggest bias. In a story by National Public Radio (2003), it was suggested that some Arab networks (television and radio broadcasts) have influenced civilian opinion of U.S. conflict in Iraq by the ways in which news is reported.

## *Television*

Gerbner (1998) tells the story of a child who once answered an inquiry about the value of Thomas Edison in our modern world by saying that without Mr. Edison, "...we would still be watching television by candlelight" (p. 75). Television provides a base of models with its characters. Whether a steamy love affair between a client and his therapist as in "Prince of Tides" (Streisand, 1991), or a highly misconstrued presentation of what mental health services entail as in "Anger Management" (Sequal, 2003), bias in media impacts consumers in potentially damaging ways. It is in the nature of movie making to manipulate the audience (Turner, 2005). Given that approximately 98% of homes in the United States have a television (Bushman & Anderson, 2001), the effects are far-reaching. Television characters model attitudes and behavior, including aggressiveness. In addition, television desensitizes viewers to violence, and, on the other end of this spectrum, increases fear of victimization. Further, by glamorizing violence on television, producers send the message that such violence is acceptable. Therefore, aggression could be learned by rewarding violence (Center for Communication, 1998). Still, consistent with a view later adopted by Freud, Aristotle insisted that the cathartic nature with which emotions are aroused by drama can be therapeutic (Hothersall, 2004, p. 28).

Judgments about a television character influence interpretations of acceptable violence. If an admired character is involved in, for example, a gun battle, that character's behavior will be rationalized more often than when a less admired character performs the same behaviors. To extend this point, Dillard, Plotnick, Godbold, Friemuth, and Edgar (1996) found public service announcements (PSAs) on the topic of AIDS/HIV

to produce affect in participants that influenced the persuasiveness of the announcements. Further, believability of occurrences also influences emotional arousal. The realistic quality with which scenes are enacted on television may further influence attributions. Given the advance of technology in present day television graphics, believability is no longer the issue it once perhaps was.

“Crime is a major staple” in news, and consumption, i.e., viewer interest, of such media influences what is broadcast. It has also been postulated that some television news stations target a younger audience with more brief stories and less sound bites. This brings fear to the idea that viewers will make attributions only by what they see. The quick pace of news stories does not provide opportunity for interpretation, and local news stations are the largest culprit of such practices. The bottom line is that a choice is made by station producers as to what will be aired, and this choice impacts consumers accordingly (Hamilton, 1998).

Firmstone (2002) reported a nationally representative survey from the United Kingdom in which participants were asked to give their opinion after viewing several television clips of the Persian Gulf War. Results indicated that 70% of viewers approve of all the footage, but 57% of respondents do not approve of scenes where captured coalition forces are being exploited on Iraqi television. Some respondents felt that television stations were justified in airing scenes showing Iraqis in a bad light, but that scenes showing Iraqis surrendering might lower support for the war against Iraq. This leaves media with a decision of what to provide its viewers; and the decision varies among broadcasters. For example, WTN broadcasting company aired “more explicit material” (e.g., charred bodies) compared to other companies such as the BBC.

Firmstone (2002) concluded that a combination of factors, i.e., context and genre within which violent acts occur, in television affect viewer interpretation.

Jones (2002) speaks to bias in media reports by citing a January, 2001 *San Francisco Chronicle* news article with the headline: "Aggressive tendencies fostered in children by violent television shows and video games can be tempered if they cut back their viewing and playing, a new Stanford University study shows." However, the news article apparently did not discuss all of the results. That is, kids who watched violent programs improved their behavior when cutting back television viewing, but not any more than kids who watched nonviolent programs.

Gerbner (1998) illuminates other biases in television media. For example, White males are over represented by 150% of their true population proportion. Older persons are represented by only 20% of their proportion. Further, only 1.3% of characters in television are impoverished (p. 76).

Park (2001) discusses *the illusion of knowing* concept where perceived social approval compels individuals to accept the consensus of a group. This illusion of knowing, where actual and self-perceived knowledge are incongruent, may cause individuals to be inadvertently manipulated by media. The manipulation is inadvertent because individuals may believe they are too intelligent to be manipulated. Park's results indicate a negative correlation between educational attainment and illusion of actual knowledge. Further, compared to consumption of written and radio media, television consumption leads to more inaccurate self-perceived knowledge. Consensus may be damaging. Social involvement in political issues leads to misperception of one's

knowledge more often than when involvement is not within a social consensus (Park, 2001).

### Summary

This study is motivated by the compelling evidence that bias in media does exist. For purposes of this study, biased media is defined as that media which has a planned agenda in its presentation as shown by a distinct difference in wording. McClure et al. (2001) concluded, “there is no evidence” that television and radio are more valid than written messages. No matter the type of media, bias can be damaging. An integral review of relevant literature does not, however, speak to measures of defensive attribution, that is, blaming the victim, regarding a crime that has occurred. The literature also has not documented full employment of web-based methodology, which further utilizes technology and thus increases external validity of results with its long-armed reach at samples. In one comparison, Gaddy and Tanjong’s (1986) review differentiated natural disasters from sociopolitical ones (e.g., crime waves) in terms of attribution. The bestowal of responsibility to the victims of a crime differed significantly from attributions in natural disaster situations. Additional evidence for bias in media exists as shown by Mulilis and Lipa’s (1990) finding that participants increased earthquake preparedness when exposed to media that was intentionally manipulated so as to have an earthquake be perceived as threatening. In another comparison, Hastie and Park (1986) made case for a distinction between online and memory-based judgments. More concluding in this respect, McCabe, Boyd, Couper, Crawford, and D’Arcy (2002) found that web-based survey methodology produced higher response rates than U.S. mail survey methods. Further, McCabe et al. found that a more gender-mixed sample resulted from the



web-based methodology in a college undergraduate population. These findings compel methodology for the present study which investigated the degree to which media significantly influences emotion and leads to defensive attribution. Finally, replication research is underutilized (Karr & Larson, 2005). Therefore, by replicating the methodology of Lontz (2004), this study adds to a body of literature while also working to substantiate previous empirical findings.

## Chapter 3

### Method

#### Participants

Six-hundred twenty-five participants, with a mean age of 20.8 years, from undergraduate social sciences courses at three universities were randomly assigned to read one of the two versions of a news story about a crime. Participants were solicited from 1) A small (approximately 6,100 students in 2004), private, Jesuit, university in the Northwest U.S.; 2) A large (approximately 44,800 students in 2004), public, AAU (Association of the 62 leading research universities in America) university in the Midwest U.S.; and, 3) A large (approximately 48,000 students in 2004), public, AAU university in the Southeast U.S. A total of 650 participants took part in the study. Prior to analyses, data from 25 participants who submitted insufficient data were excluded from results.

Table 1

#### Race/Ethnicity of Participants

Identification	Reported Frequency
Asian or Asian American, including Chinese, Japanese, Pacific Islanders, and others	42
Black or African American	50
Hispanic or Latino, including Mexican American, South American, Central American, and others	38
White, Caucasian, Anglo, European American (non-Hispanic)	468
American Indian or Native American	2
Mixed: Parents are from two different groups	14
Middle Eastern	6
Race or ethnicity is not listed above	3

Table 2

**Completed Education**

Completed Education	Reported Frequency
High School	144
1 year college	190
2 years college	122
3 years college	47
4 years college	44
5+ years college	71

Table 3

**Class Standing**

Present College Class Standing	Reported Frequency
Freshman	248
Sophomore	157
Junior	85
Senior	57
Graduated or Pursuing a Graduate Degree	73

Table 4

**Reported Gender**

Male	191
Female	417

An email describing the study (Appendix A) was sent to instructors of the courses being solicited. The solicitation email asked approving instructors to forward the electronic letter to their class lists. There was a web-link in this email by which participants accessed participation in the study. The email described how participants visit a website and complete questionnaires for a study that is being conducted.

## Materials

Following a comprehensive literature review, both the news stories and the data collection measures were created by the researcher of the present study. An analysis of H.H. Kelley's (1973) articulation of attribution theory lead to the creation of a defensive attribution measure. After reading one of the two versions of the news story, participants completed two questionnaires (see Appendix E). The first questionnaire asked participants to rank each of the characters in the news story by level of responsibility for the crime that has been reported (i.e., most responsible for the crime receives a ranking of 1). The next questionnaire asked participants to rate each of the characters in the news story on a 6-point scale. The purpose of this rating is to identify the degree to which participants agree with the actions of each news story character. Wording of the news story differs in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency. Participants were randomly assigned to read either NEWS1 or NEWS2 (i.e., the version of the news story that is high in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency).

## Research Design

A post-test only control group design drives this study (Table 5). The fabricated news story in this study has two versions which differ in magnitude of distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency. The experimental group of participants read the version of the news story that is high in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency. After reading one of the two versions, participants in each group were asked to make responsibility ratings and agreement ratings. The degree to which the victim of the crime is blamed for the crime, i.e., defensive attribution, was measured. Data consisted of the defensive attribution means for each group. A statistical comparison of means elicited results. It

was hypothesized that *a media report that is high in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency will increase defensive attribution ( $\mu_1 - \mu_2 \neq 0$ )*. A correlation between responsibility and agreement ratings for characters in the news story was then calculated.

Table 5

Model of the study design. A post-test only control group design.

Group	Time→	
Group 1	Treatment	Observation
Group 2	---	Observation

#### Website

When participants visited the study's website, they were presented with informed consent (Appendix D) preceding any data collection. Once learning that they may withdraw at any time without penalty, and agreeing to participate, participants observed the following message: *Attention: The following news story is from a large newspaper on the East Coast U.S. If you wish to continue, please be aware that the contents of the news story may be disturbing.* A debriefing statement immediately followed data collection. The debriefing statement reads: *The news story you just read was fabricated, not real, and any familiar characters or events are completely coincidental. If you feel personally distressed by participation in this study, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher.* Contact information for the primary researcher then followed.

## Data Analysis

- H<sub>1</sub>: A news story that is high in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency will increase defensive attribution ( $\mu_1 - \mu_2 \neq 0$ ).
- H<sub>2</sub>: There is a significant negative correlation between defensive attribution and approval of characters in a news story that differs in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency ( $R < 0$ ).

After reading, participants were asked to rank each of the characters in the news story they read by the characters' level of responsibility for the crime that was committed. The next questionnaire asked participants to identify their feelings toward, that is, agreement with the actions of, each of the characters in the news story (see Appendix E).

Data were analyzed using a two-independent-samples t-test via SPSS. The mean scores of defensive attribution for the two randomly assigned groups were compared. This was done by assigning a value to the score of defensive attribution. That is to say: a score of 1 (i.e., most responsible for the crime) received a value of 6; a score of 2 received a value of 5; 3 received a value of 4; 4 a value of 3; 5 a value of 2; and, a score of 6 received a value of 1 when entering raw data for statistical analyses. For example, a participant who ranked the victim of the crime as being the 3<sup>rd</sup> most responsible for occurrence of the crime received a raw score attribution ranking of 4. The raw score from each participant was summed with the scores for all participants in the respective group, and a mean for each group was obtained. The means of the two groups were then compared using a two-independent-samples t-test.

Additionally, it was hypothesized that there is a significant negative correlation between defensive attribution and approval of (i.e., agreement with) characters in a news story that is high in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency ( $R < 0$ ). To determine the

correlation between measures in this study, Kendall's tau\_b coefficient via SPSS was employed.

### **Protection of Human Participants**

The nature of this study provided minimal risk to participants both emotionally and physically. However, some concerns and ways to address these concerns were anticipated and are addressed here.

1. **Misunderstanding or confusion that may occur during collection of data.**
  - a. The researcher thoroughly explained expectations to participants.
2. **No physical or emotional harm was anticipated in collection of this data. Further, the deception in this study was not anticipated to cause any pain, discomfort, or other distress. In compliance with ethical code 8.08C (APA, 2002), the informed consent instructed each participant on how to obtain appropriate services (i.e., university counseling center) if in any way distressed by participation in the study. Further, the researcher's contact information was provided to each participant prior to data collection so as to be available for potential questions or concerns regarding the study.**
3. **In compliance with ethical code 8.07C (APA, 2002), the informed consent advised participants that they may withdraw from the study, as well as withdraw their data from the study, at any time without penalty.**
4. **Participation was voluntary.**
5. **Confidentiality was assured on the part of the researcher.**

Internet samples may not be entirely representative of the population. However, although more data is needed, findings from internet methodology are consistent with

findings from traditional methodology (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004).

Additional benefits of online methodology include: Increased ability to gather participants beyond traditional reaches, and thus increase sample sizes; increased efficiency in data collection; simplifying the data entry process; low expense; and, increased diversity (e.g., gender) of samples. Further, in contrast to other findings (e.g., Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukophadhyay, & Scherlis, 1998), internet users are found to be no different in adjustment and depression from non-internet users.

Internet methodology may also act as a motivating agent for eliciting the participation of frequent internet users (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & Oliver, 2004). Internet-based assessment can be far-reaching, enabling researchers to gather data from people with disabilities who might otherwise be unable to participate. Further, those individuals who do not speak English as a first language, or whose cultural diversity precludes them from participating, now have an alternative for inclusion (Naglieri, Drasgow, Schmit, Handler, Prifitera, Margolis, & Velasquez, 2004). One conundrum with online methodology is that the ability to obtain large samples increases the chance of polluting the pool of participants (Kraut et al., 2004). However, “using the internet is no more ethical or unethical than other research forms” (Kraut et. al, 2004). If taking special precaution to consider its limitations, online methodology has great potential in the world of research.



## Chapter 4

### Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate the degree to which media significantly influences emotion and leads to defensive attribution. That is, this study specifically set out to decipher responsibility attributed to and level of agreement with characters in a news story. There are two versions of the news story. The version that is high in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency was predicted to increase defensive attribution, that is, blaming the victim. Secondly, this study predicted to find a significant negative correlation between defensive attribution to and agreement with characters in the news story. Results were obtained by employing t-tests and a correlation measure. Additional t-tests and correlation measures were employed to represent findings from each of the three subgroups separately. For interpretation, variable RWOMAN denotes the magnitude to which participants attributed blame to the victim of the news story, that is, the magnitude of defensive attribution. Variable AWOMAN denotes level of agreement with the actions of the victim. Variable NEWS1 is the news story that is not high in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency. The news story that is high in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency is called NEWS2. It was hypothesized that participants who read NEWS2 would be more likely to blame the victim. It was also hypothesized that blaming the victim increases as level of agreement with the victim decreases.

Of the 625 participants included in analyses, 299 were randomly assigned to read NEWS1 and 326 to read NEWS2. A two-independent-samples t-test for measuring defensive attribution, that is, blaming the victim, compared those participants who read

NEWS1 ( $\mu = 2.28$ , S.D. = 1.50) with those who read NEWS2 ( $\mu = 3.81$ , S.D. = 1.59). The two-independent-samples t-test for variable RWOMAN yields  $t = -12.35$  and  $p = .42$ . The probability associated with this statistic is .00, which is significant at  $\alpha = .01$ . Therefore, the null hypothesis is not accepted. A news story that is high in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency increased defensive attribution ( $\mu_1 - \mu_2 \neq 0$ ). There is a significant difference between the defensive attribution means of those participants who read NEWS1 and those who read NEWS2. Those participants who read NEWS2 are significantly more likely to blame the victim. There is a probability of 0.95 that an interval of -1.77 and -1.29 encloses the true difference between the mean scores of defensive attribution for the two populations. This is a meaningful statistic because it represents a significant difference in the interval between groups. Those participants who read the news story that is high in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency were more likely to blame the victim.

Bivariate correlations were calculated by employing Kendall's tau\_b coefficient (Howell, 307-309). For participants who read NEWS1, variables RWOMAN (i.e., responsibility attributed to the victim) and AWOMAN (i.e., level of agreement with the actions of the victim) are correlated at  $\tau = .30$ . The probability associated with this  $\tau$  statistic is .00, which is significant at  $\alpha = .01$ . That is, for participants who read NEWS1, the probability of there being a significant negative correlation between variables RWOMAN and AWOMAN is .30 higher than the probability that these variables are not correlated. For participants who read NEWS2, variables RWOMAN and AWOMAN are correlated at  $\tau = .38$ . The probability associated with this  $\tau$  statistic is .00, which is significant at  $\alpha = .01$ . For participants who read NEWS2, the probability of there being a

significant negative correlation between variables RWOMAN and AWOMAN is .38 higher than the probability that these variables are not correlated. The null hypothesis is not accepted. There is a significant negative correlation between defensive attribution and approval of characters in a media report that differs in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency ( $R < 0$ ). There is actually a significant negative correlation between RWOMAN and AWOMAN whether participants read NEWS1 or NEWS2. Participants were more likely to blame the victim as they were less likely to agree with the victim; the more that participants agreed with the actions of the victim in the news story, the less likely they were to blame the victim. Table 1 and Table 2 summarize these results.

#### Results of Additional Analyses

T-tests and a correlation measure were employed for all variables. Further analyses compared the three different universities from which participants were solicited. Following is results for each variable by university and type of news story read. That is, results from those participants randomly assigned to read NEWS1 are followed by results from those who read NEWS2. Prior to reporting results from participants at each university separately, this section begins with a report of overall data.

As shown in Table 1, when the three subgroups are analyzed together, two-independent-samples t-tests for variables RWOMAN, RHUSBAND, RBETTYH, and RJOEA are significant at  $\alpha = .01$ . That is, a significant difference in defensive attribution is indicated between participants who read NEWS1 and those who read NEWS2 (i.e.,  $\mu_1 - \mu_2 \neq 0$ ) for these variables. Table 2 and Table 3 summarize results of the correlation measure which indicates significant correlations on all variables when analyzing the three subgroups together. That is, a significant negative correlation is

indicated between level of attributed responsibility and agreement ratings for variables WOMAN, HUSBAND, BETTYH, JOEA, JESSIEW, and OPERATO whether participants read NEWS1 or NEWS2.

Table 1

**Two-independent-samples t-tests for all groups combined**

Variable(s)	t=	p=	probability associated with the statistic
RWOMAN	-12.35	.42	.00**
RHUSBAND	11.45	.66	.00**
RBETTYH	11.01	.00	.00**
RJOEA	-7.87	.00	.00**
RJESSIEW	-1.12	.05	.26
ROPERATO	-.85	.40	.39

\*\*significant at  $\alpha = .01$

Table 2

**Correlation measures for all groups combined when reading NEWS1**

Variables	$\tau =$	probability associated with the statistic
RWOMAN and AWOMAN	.30	.00**
RHUSBAND and AHUSBAND	.17	.00**
RBETTYH and ABETTYH	.14	.00**
RJOEA and AJOEA	.33	.00**
RJESSIEW and AJESSIEW	.41	.00**
ROPERATO and AOPERATO	.27	.00**

\*\*significant at  $\alpha = .01$

Table 3

**Correlation measures for all groups combined when reading NEWS2**

Variables	$\tau$	probability associated with the statistic
RWOMAN and AWOMAN	.38	.00**
RHUSBAND and AHUSBAND	.31	.00**
RBETTYH and ABETTYH	.31	.00**
RJOEA and AJOEA	.13	.00**
RJESSIEW and AJESSIEW	.36	.00**
ROPERATO and AOPERATO	.41	.00**

\*\*significant at  $\alpha = .01$

Two-independent-samples t-tests indicate a significant difference in attribution ratings for variables RWOMAN, RHUSBAND, RBETTYH, and RJOEA when comparing scores from participants who read NEWS1 with those who read NEWS2. However, there is no significant difference in attribution ratings for variables RJESSIEW and ROPERATO. That is, the distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency that distinguishes NEWS1 from NEWS2 affected responsibility ratings for the WOMAN, HUSBAND, BETTY, and JOE, but not for JESSIE or the OPERATOR. Kendall's tau<sub>b</sub> coefficient found there is a significant negative correlation between all variables (i.e., the WOMAN, HUSBAND, BETTY, JOE, JESSIE, and OPERATOR) whether participants were randomly assigned to read NEWS1 or NEWS2. That is, a significant negative correlation is indicated between degree of blame attributed to and level of agreement with all characters in the news story, regardless of which news story was read.

Table 4 summarizes results from participants who attend a small, private, Jesuit university in the Northwest U.S. For these participants, two-independent-samples t-tests for variables RWOMAN, and RBETTYH are significant at  $\alpha = .01$ . Variable

RHUSBAND is significant at  $\alpha = .05$ . That is, a significant difference in defensive attribution is indicated between participants who read NEWS1 and those who read NEWS2 (i.e.,  $\mu_1 - \mu_2 \neq 0$ ) for these variables. Table 5 and Table 6 summarize results of the correlation measure for this subgroup. Table 5 indicates that variables WOMAN, JOEA, and JESSIEW have significant correlations. That is, a significant negative correlation is indicated between level of attributed responsibility and agreement ratings for variables WOMAN, JOEA, and JESSIEW when these participants read NEWS1. For participants from this subgroup who read NEWS2, variables WOMAN, HUSBAND, BETTYH, and OPERATO are significant.

Table 4

**Two-independent-samples t-tests for participants from a small, private, Jesuit university**

Variable(s)	t=	p=	probability associated with the statistic
RWOMAN	-3.82	.60	.00**
RHUSBAND	2.50	.04	.02*
RBETTYH	3.52	.00	.00**
RJOEA	-1.27	.09	.21
RJESSIEW	-.08	.77	.94
ROPERATO	-1.82	.33	.08

\*\*significant at  $\alpha = .01$ , \*significant at  $\alpha = .05$

Table 5

**Correlation measures on NEWS1 for participants from a small, private, Jesuit university**

Variables	$r$	probability associated with the statistic
RWOMAN and AWOMAN	.36	.05*
RHUSBAND and AHUSBAND	.04	.80
RBETTYH and ABETTYH	.05	.79
RJOEA and AJOE	.60	.00**
RJESSIEW and AJESSIEW	.48	.02*
ROPERATO and AOPERATO	.26	.16

\*\*significant at  $\alpha = .01$ , \*significant at  $\alpha = .05$

Table 6

**Correlation measures on NEWS2 for participants from a small, private, Jesuit university**

Variables	$r$	probability associated with the statistic
RWOMAN and AWOMAN	.43	.03*
RHUSBAND and AHUSBAND	.45	.02*
RBETTYH and ABETTYH	.44	.03*
RJOEA and AJOE	-.13	.49
RJESSIEW and AJESSIEW	.38	.09
ROPERATO and AOPERATO	.39	.05*

\*significant at  $\alpha = .05$

As shown in Table 7, for participants from a large, public, AAU university in the Midwest U.S., two-independent-samples t-tests for variables RWOMAN, RHUSBAND, RBETTYH, and RJOEA are significant at  $\alpha = .01$ . That is, a significant difference in defensive attribution is indicated between participants who read NEWS1 and those who read NEWS2 (i.e.,  $\mu_1 - \mu_2 \neq 0$ ) for these variables. Table 8 and Table 9 summarize results of the correlation measure which indicates significant correlations on all variables by

these participants. That is, a significant negative correlation is indicated between level of attributed responsibility and agreement ratings for variables WOMAN, HUSBAND, BETTYH, JOEA, JESSIEW, and OPERATO whether participants read NEWS1 or NEWS2.

Table 7

**Two-independent-samples t-tests for participants from a large Midwest university**

Variable(s)	t=	p=	probability associated with the statistic
RWOMAN	-8.43	.14	.00**
RHUSBAND	7.53	.67	.00**
RBETTYH	7.69	.02	.00**
RJOEA	-4.77	.11	.00**
RJESSIEW	-.31	.57	.76
ROPERATO	.34	.11	.73

\*\*significant at  $\alpha = .01$

Table 8

**Correlation measures on NEWS1 for participants from a large Midwest university**

Variables	$\tau =$	probability associated with the statistic
RWOMAN and AWOMAN	.33	.00**
RHUSBAND and AHUSBAND	.22	.01**
RBETTYH and ABETTYH	.15	.04*
RJOEA and AJOEA	.34	.00**
RJESSIEW and AJESSIEW	.40	.00**
ROPERATO and AOPERATO	.15	.04*

\*\*significant at  $\alpha = .01$ , \*significant at  $\alpha = .05$



Table 9

**Correlation measures on NEWS2 for participants from a large Midwest university**

Variables	$\tau$	probability associated with the statistic
RWOMAN and AWOMAN	.35	.00**
RHUSBAND and AHUSBAND	.30	.00**
RBETTYH and ABETTYH	.28	.00**
RJOEA and AJOE	.19	.00**
RJESSIEW and AJESSIEW	.39	.00**
ROPERATO and AOPERATO	.44	.00**

\*\*significant at  $\alpha = .01$

Table 10 summarizes results from a large, public, AAU university in the Southeast U.S. Two-independent-samples t-tests for variables RWOMAN, RHUSBAND, RBETTYH, and RJOEA are significant at  $\alpha = .01$ . That is, a significant difference in defensive attribution is indicated between participants who read NEWS1 and those who read NEWS2 (i.e.,  $\mu_1 - \mu_2 \neq 0$ ) for these variables. Table 11 and Table 12 summarize results of the correlation measure. Significant correlations are indicated for all variables when these participants read NEWS1. Significant correlations are indicated for all variables except variable JOEA when these participants read NEWS2. That is, a significant negative correlation is indicated between level of attributed responsibility and agreement ratings for variables WOMAN, HUSBAND, BETTYH, JOEA, JESSIEW, and OPERATO when participants read NEWS1. Results from participants at this university who read NEWS2 indicate a significant negative correlation for variables WOMAN, HUSBAND, BETTYH, JESSIEW, and OPERATO.

Table 10

**Two-independent-samples t-tests for participants from a large Southeast university**

Variable(s)	t=	p=	probability associated with the statistic
RWOMAN	-8.57	.76	.00**
RHUSBAND	8.22	.83	.00**
RBETTYH	7.27	.00	.00**
RJOEA	-6.22	.12	.00**
RJESSIEW	-1.21	.04	.23
ROPERATO	-.79	.02	.43

\*\*significant at  $\alpha = .01$ 

Table 11

**Correlation measures on NEWS1 for participants from a large Southeast university**

Variables	$\tau =$	probability associated with the statistic
RWOMAN and AWOMAN	.26	.00**
RHUSBAND and AHUSBAND	.17	.01*
RBETTYH and ABETTYH	.15	.02*
RJOEA and AJOEA	.30	.00**
RJESSIEW and AJESSIEW	.42	.00**
ROPERATO and AOPERATO	.36	.00**

\*\*significant at  $\alpha = .01$ , \*significant at  $\alpha = .05$ 

Table 12

**Correlation measures on NEWS2 for participants from a large Southeast university**

Variables	$\tau =$	probability associated with the statistic
RWOMAN and AWOMAN	.40	.00**
RHUSBAND and AHUSBAND	.33	.00**
RBETTYH and ABETTYH	.37	.00**
RJOEA and AJOEA	.09	.14
RJESSIEW and AJESSIEW	.29	.00**
ROPERATO and AOPERATO	.39	.00**

\*\*significant at  $\alpha = .01$

## Effects of Gender and Race/Ethnicity

Myriad cultural variables may interact with results. For example, it is impossible to randomly assign gender. Therefore, this variable must be weighed for its potential effects on results. Of 625 total participants, 191 reported male as their gender and 417 (69%) reported female. A two-independent-samples t-test was used to detect differences in defensive attribution means between participants who are male and those who are female. When comparing results from participants who are male at all three universities, those who read NEWS1 ( $\mu = 2.55$ , S.D. = 1.68) were less likely to blame the victim than those who read NEWS2 ( $\mu = 3.97$ , S.D. = 1.52). The t-test yields  $t = -6.11$  and  $p = .03$  for variable RWOMAN. The probability associated with this statistic is .00, which is significant at  $\alpha = .01$ . There is a probability of 0.95 that an interval of -1.87 and -.96 encloses the true difference between the mean scores of defensive attribution.

Females who read NEWS1 ( $\mu = 2.17$ , S.D. = 1.40) were less likely to blame the victim than those who read NEWS2 ( $\mu = 3.77$ , S.D. = 1.59). A two-independent-samples t-test yields  $t = -10.84$  and  $p = .02$ . The probability associated with this statistic is .00, which is significant at  $\alpha = .01$ . There is a probability of 0.95 that an interval of -1.89 and -1.31 encloses the true difference between mean scores of defensive attribution. These results are summarized along with other variables in Tables 13 and 14. Both male and female participants were more likely to blame the victim when reading NEWS2, that is, the news story which subtly depicts her to be less virtuous. However, a univariate analysis of variance ( $F = 4.67$ ,  $p = .03$ ) finds that defensive attribution is significantly influenced by the gender of participants. Analyses found that male participants in this study are significantly more likely to blame the victim.

Table 13

**Two-independent-samples t-tests for all males combined on variable GENDER**

Variable(s)	t=	p=	probability associated with the statistic
RWOMAN	-6.11	.03	.00**
RHUSBAND	5.79	.86	.00**
RBETTYH	6.01	.30	.00**
RJOEA	-3.65	.00	.00**
RJESSIEW	-.81	.12	.42
ROPERATO	-.43	.36	.67

\*\*significant at  $\alpha = .01$ 

Table 14

**Two-independent-samples t-tests for all females combined on variable GENDER**

Variable(s)	t=	p=	probability associated with the statistic
RWOMAN	-10.84	.02	.00**
RHUSBAND	9.94	.54	.00**
RBETTYH	9.27	.00	.00**
RJOEA	-7.13	.65	.00**
RJESSIEW	-1.07	.07	.29
ROPERATO	-.70	.79	.48

\*\*significant at  $\alpha = .01$



Participants in this study represent multiple races and ethnicities. Of those 607 participants who reported their race/ethnicity, 75% identify as White. Therefore, mean defensive attribution scores from participants who are White were compared with those who are of other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Participants who are White and read NEWS1 ( $\mu = 2.39$ ,  $S.D. = 1.55$ ) blamed the victim less than those participants who are White and read NEWS2 ( $\mu = 3.82$ ,  $S.D. = 1.49$ ). A two-independent-samples t-test on variable RWOMAN yields  $t = -9.99$  and  $p = .18$ . The probability associated with this statistic is .00, which is significant at  $\alpha = .01$ . There is a probability of 0.95 that an interval of -1.71 and -1.15 encloses the true difference between mean scores of defensive attribution from participants who are White. Participants who are of other racial/ethnic backgrounds and read NEWS1 ( $\mu = 2.06$ ,  $S.D. = 1.37$ ) blamed the victim less than those participants who are of other racial/ethnic backgrounds and read NEWS2 ( $\mu = 3.85$ ,  $S.D. = 1.86$ ). A two-independent-samples t-test on variable RWOMAN yields  $t = -6.83$  and  $p = .00$ . The probability associated with this statistic is .00, which is significant at  $\alpha = .01$ . There is a probability of 0.95 that an interval of -2.31 and -1.27 encloses the true difference between mean scores of defensive attribution from participants who are of other (i.e., non-White) racial/ethnic backgrounds. These results are summarized along with other variables in Tables 15 and 16. Reading NEWS2 accurately predicted increased blaming of the victim regardless of race/ethnicity of participants. Further, a univariate analysis of variance ( $F = 3.63$ ,  $p = .06$ ) finds that race/ethnicity of participants is not a significant predictor of defensive attribution in this study.

Table 15

**Two-independent-samples t-tests for participants who are White**

Variable(s)	t=	p=	probability associated with the statistic
RWOMAN	-9.99	.18	.00**
RHUSBAND	10.82	.79	.00**
RBETTYH	10.50	.01	.00**
RJOEA	-7.46	.05	.00**
RJESSIEW	-.60	.28	.55
ROPERATO	-1.65	.12	.10

\*\*significant at  $\alpha = .01$

Table 16

**Two-independent-samples t-tests for participants whose identity is other than White**

Variable(s)	t=	p=	probability associated with the statistic
RWOMAN	-6.83	.00	.00**
RHUSBAND	4.22	.70	.00**
RBETTYH	3.95	.02	.00**
RJOEA	-2.90	.27	.00**
RJESSIEW	-1.17	.07	.24
ROPERATO	.94	.35	.35

\*\*significant at  $\alpha = .01$

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

Six hundred twenty five participants from three universities contributed data for this study. Variable NEWS1 was read by 299 participants, and 326 read NEWS2. This study investigated the degree to which media significantly influences emotion and leads to defensive attribution. This was done by randomly assigning participants to read one of the two versions of a news story about a crime. It was hypothesized that participants who read the version of the news story that is high in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency (i.e., NEWS2) would be more likely to blame the victim of the crime. It was also hypothesized that blaming the victim would increase as level of agreement with the actions of the victim decreases.

Results indicate that a news report high in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency increased defensive attribution. That is, participants who read NEWS2 were significantly more likely to blame the victim. Further, as degree of participant agreement with the actions of the victim of the crime increased, blame of the victim decreased. Accordingly, disapproval of the victim's actions predicted increased degree of blame. There is a statistically significant negative correlation between defensive attribution and approval of characters in a media report that differs in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency whether participants read NEWS1 or NEWS2.

When analyzing the three subgroups together, results indicate similar findings on other variables. Degree of blame was affected by version of news story read for variables RWOMAN, RHUSBAND, RBETTYH, and RJOEA. Degree of blame attributed to RJESSIEW and ROPERATO was not significantly influenced by version of news story



read. That is, responsibility ratings given for Jessie Walker and the 911 operator were not significant when comparing participants reading NEWS1 with those who read NEWS2. Of the six characters in the news story, however, participants who read NEWS1 ranked the woman (i.e., victim) as number 6, that is, least responsible for the crime that was committed. Those participants who read NEWS2, the version that was manipulated so as to have the victim appear somewhat less virtuous, ranked the woman as second most responsible for her own murder. Further, a statistically significant negative correlation is indicated between degree of blame attributed to and agreement with all characters in the news story, regardless of which version was read.

Results were similar when analyzing each subgroup separately. Participants from a small university in the Northwest U.S. ranked the victim of the crime as least responsible, out of 6 characters in the news story, when reading NEWS1. These participants ranked the victim as third most responsible when reading NEWS2. Participants from a large university in the Midwest U.S. ranked the victim as least responsible when reading NEWS1, and second most responsible when reading NEWS2. Those participants from a large Southeast U.S. university who read NEWS1 ranked the victim as least responsible, while those reading NEWS2 ranked the victim as second most responsible for the crime.

### Limitations

Although this study solicited participants from universities in three distinct regions of the U.S., college students are not representative of the general population. Interpretation of results must be considered in the context of this limitation. Further, cultural factors including socioeconomic status and educational attainment may influence

attribution, as well as the accuracy of instruments intended to measure attribution. There may also be limitations stemming from the theoretical base of this study. Kelley (1973) himself asserts that attribution theory assumes individuals consider all information. That is, Kelley's theory does not account for attribution errors such as those that are based on perceived personal characteristics rather than on situational factors. As mentioned earlier, participants may also assume high-consensus (McClure et al., 2001). That is, participants may erroneously believe that they are making attributions similar to those made by others.

Methodology of the present study replicates that of Lontz (2004). Following a nonproductive search of mental measurement journals, the news story and questionnaires were created for the Lontz (2004) study. These measurement tools have reliably produced face validity and criterion validity. However, future research will address existing limitations of these instruments. For example, additional factors, such as history, could affect results. That is, if one participant discusses the study's intentions with another potential participant before the potential participant takes part in the study, then the momentary deception that is necessary to obtain accurate results will be compromised. Such a threat to internal validity is difficult to prevent. However, continued research will further assess the accuracy with which data collection tools are measuring their intended constructs.

Limitations to the use of online methodology must also be considered. Anonymity makes it possible for participants to respond more than once, but this can be prevented. Further, special care must be given to articulating the nature of the relationship with potential participants. This is because the ability to clearly state

guidelines to potential participants is compromised when not meeting in person. Informed consent, debriefing, and related documents must be coherent and easily accessible to participants (Naglieri, Drasgow, Schmit, Handler, Prifitera, Margolis, & Velasquez, 2004). Although online participants can withdraw at any time without pressure, there is still a reduced capacity to support participants who may have an emotional reaction that requires professional attention. Finally, it is worthwhile to be aware of issues regarding participants who cannot give consent, for example, children or individuals with a cognitive impairment (Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004).

A majority (75%) of participants in this study are White. Approximately 69% of participants are also female. A geographically diverse solicitation of participants was intended to gather a more evenly distributed population. Future research will specifically pursue this in order to increase generalizability. Another limitation is that, from the small, private, Jesuit, university in the Northwest U.S., only 42 participants took part. Nearly 300 participants were solicited from each of the other two universities. However, 42 participants from a university that registered only 6,100 students in 2004 is 0.7% of their student body. This study gathered data from participants at the two larger universities that represents only 0.6% of their student body. That is, the sample from a small, private, Jesuit, university in the Northwest U.S. is proportionately larger than either of the other two universities.

### Implications of Results

These results strengthen the case that biased media affects consumers. The hope of this research is that the lay person, as well as providers of written, radio, and television

broadcasts, gain additional awareness of how biased media influences attributions made by consumers. Practitioners who guide their clients toward an awareness of attributional style are employing skills that can illuminate the connection between thoughts and feelings which lead to attributions. By identifying problematic interpersonal patterns, for example, practitioners may help their clients develop means to change. Attribution style may exacerbate or ameliorate chronic mental illness. Attribution style may impute responsibility, thus increasing the likelihood that someone who commits a crime will re-offend. More specific to the present study, such awareness could facilitate a decrease in defensive attribution by clients with such a problematic style. These implications are applicable in consulting settings as interpersonal relationship variables are also affected by self-government.

On another plane, simple awareness of one's attributional style can abate the stigma of receiving mental health services. For example, a study that was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (Gardner, 2005), which is an expansion of the 1990 National Comorbidity Survey, found that 26% of the general U.S. population, which is greater than 77 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005), has symptomatology consistent with some mental disorder. It was also found that 80% (61.6 million) of these individuals seek treatment eventually, and that about 41% receive treatment annually. That is, 31.57 million Americans consume mental health services annually. These figures can be utilized to reduce the defensive attributions which stem from the belief that mental illness is uncommon. That is, knowledge of these statistics actualizes the prevalence of receiving mental health services thus reducing stigma of mental illness. In a case where,

for example, a victim is blamed for misfortune because of perceived mental incompetence, present results may decrease defensive attribution.

Findings of the present study extend literature that is available to practitioners in clinical, policy, and consulting settings. By bringing into awareness the effects of biased media such as the news story in this study, self-government is motivated by a more realistic appraisal of imparted information. Focusing on facts, while disregarding ambiguous and misleading information, compels consumers of various media sources to more realistically appraise issues such as public policy. Many studies have found that information which is meant to distort public opinion on various issues is effective in doing so (e.g., Price et al., 1997; McClure et al., 1991; Daschmann, 2000; Lontz, 2004). Findings from the present study, which represent data from a geographically diverse population, provide additional evidence regarding the effects of media bias.

#### Directions for Future Research

Following are ideas that were beyond the scope of the design for this study. These were generated during the course as those which ideally promote analysis and reduction of the adverse effects of media bias:

- 1) Variables such as age, socioeconomic status, and educational attainment were not analyzed for current results. Multivariate data analyses would provide increased validity for measurement tools. Further, by identifying social and genetic factors that correlate with defensive attribution, a multicultural perspective is added to this topic of research.
- 2) In the present study, the victim of the news story is female. It will be of particular interest for future studies to examine the effects of victim

gender on results. Such a design will require additional experimental groups.

- 3) Another change to the present methodology might include a pre-post test experimental design that is meant to assess the reliability of test measures. That is, after participants' level of defensive attribution is measured, there will be an instruction phase whereby the nature of defensive attribution is explained. As in the present study, debriefing takes place immediately following data collection. Then participants are asked to complete the same questionnaires a second time in order to examine whether awareness of defensive attribution changes actual level of defensive attribution. This technique would also further test the validity of measurement questionnaires.
- 4) Another way to obtain construct validity as well as reliability for these measurement tools is to have two or more news stories that elicit attributions.
- 5) Future research will add to the body of knowledge that is available to lay persons and professionals alike. Following are some suggestions for appraising mediated information and increasing the likelihood of accurate attributions.
  - a. Consider the source of mediated information and attempt to objectively decipher level of trust for that source.
  - b. Assess the relevance of mediated information to the topic at hand.

- c. Identify whether opposing views are being presented in a compare and contrast fashion, or if the information is merely one-sided.
  - d. Be aware of whether the information that is being mediated has a message that is consistent with earlier as well as other contemporary literature on the topic at hand.
  - e. When consuming empirical information, question the study's design, participants employed, methodology, measurement instruments, data analyses, and generalizability of results.
  - f. Be concerned with empirical publications that do not discuss limitations of the study.
- 6) Defensiveness is a global phenomenon. One challenge for studies such as this one is to articulate results in a way that avoids defensiveness by the consumer. Logical and coherent discussion of results can help illuminate the connection between constructs such as self esteem, locus of control, self-worth, and self-concept incongruence. These constructs also underlie thoughts and feelings which lead to attributions. One avenue to safely facilitate discussion on the topic of defensive attribution may be to discuss how some individuals (e.g., children) are more susceptible to biased media.
- 7) Along another vein, web-based methodology should be promoted here. The present study collected data from over 600 participants in 9 weeks, the majority of which was collected in the first 10 days. Future researchers are encouraged to get into the zeitgeist by embracing online

methodology. The ease with which data are collected and analyzed can more quickly inform professionals and laypeople, calling for continued use of online methodology.

This list is non-exhaustive and can be extended with further research on the topic of defensive attribution.

### Conclusion

This study has employed a quantitative measure of defensive attribution. The problem remains that biased media reports cloud perceived knowledge, thus influencing self-government, relationship variables, opinion of mental health services, and general understanding of imparted information. All such outcomes call for psychologists and other professionals to intervene within their respective settings and to conduct research that adds to the body of knowledge.

Results indicate that participants were more likely to blame a victim for the crime committed against her when she was made to appear less virtuous. Agreement with the actions of the victim negatively correlated with degree of blame attributed to the woman for her own murder. That is, very subtle differences in verbiage of the news story accurately predicted defensive attribution.

What would possibly compel participants to blame a victim for her own murder? One explanation might be that participants failed to see the *forest for the trees*, the forest being that someone was murdered. That is, participants as a group may have made attributions that are not representative of the victim. This *fundamental attribution error* (Ross, 1977, as cited in Weiten & Lloyd, 2003) could be due to being distracted by the information in the news story that was manipulated to be high in distinctiveness,



consensus, and consistency. That is, individual trees got in the way of an accurate appraisal.

Another explanation is the “just world” phenomenon (Lerner, 1980). When an individual blames the victim, a sense of safety may be experienced by the attributor who perceives that victims are deserving of tragedy due to personal characteristics or choices made. A person with such an attributional style is able to avoid acknowledging their own possible victimization (Lambert, Burroughs, & Nguyen, 1999). Hippocrates adhered to a similar perspective (Hothersall, 2004). Hippocrates believed that a lack of understanding epilepsy caused people to believe the disease to be a divine one. Hippocrates’ logic was that if all things not understood were divine “then there would be no end of divine things” (p. 249). In other words, a defensive attribution is a perceived sense of invincibility, something mystical, or at the very least, a sense that bad things do not happen to good people.

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## Appendix A

### Solicitation Email

**Dear Friends, Colleagues, and Fellow Educators:**

**I am conducting a study that requires participants who are university students, and need your help.**

**If you are willing, please simply forward this email message to your class lists.**

**Dear Participants:** Participation takes approximately 10-20 minutes. If your instructor/professor offers extra credit or other compensation for participating in research studies, simply print out the last page of the study and bring it to class. Another benefit is that your participation can help researchers add to the body of knowledge and improve the lives of other people.

**If you want to participate in the study, go to the following web address or just click on the link, <http://www.msu.edu/~lontzjam>. On the website, you will read a news story, and answer a few questions.**

**Sincerely,**

**Jameson Lontz, M.A.  
Doctoral Candidate  
Department of Counseling,  
Educational Psychology,  
and Special Education  
Michigan State University**



## Appendix B

### NEWS 1

*Attention: The following news story is from a large newspaper on the East Coast U.S. If you wish to continue, please be aware that the contents of the news story may be disturbing.*

In a bizarre event recently, a mother of two was killed near City University. According to the lead detective on the scene, Frank Kelley, the woman reportedly had a verbal feud with her husband of eight years *after she learned her husband was sleeping with another woman* by the name of Betty Harrison. Then the woman reportedly left the couple's country home, drove to the city, and met with a *male friend named Joe Alan whom she confided in*. Before the woman could leave, Alan's live-in girlfriend (Jessie Walker) arrived home to find the two embracing. Then, according to detective Kelley, Walker threatened to shoot the woman, and the woman fled to call 911 from the cellular phone she had left in her car. The woman explained the situation to the 911 operator who suspected the call was a prank. The phone conversation was cut off just before the woman was *shot and killed by Miss Walker*. The woman's husband could not be reached for an interview. According to Detective Kelley, *crimes like these never occur in the university district. Police are still investigating the crime.*

## Appendix B (continued)

### NEWS 2

*Attention: The following news story is from a large newspaper on the East Coast U.S. If you wish to continue, please be aware that the contents of the news story may be disturbing.*

In a bizarre event recently, a mother of two was killed near City University. According to the lead detective on the scene, Frank Kelley, the woman reportedly had a verbal feud with her husband of eight years *after she thought her husband was looking at another woman* by the name of Betty Harrison. Then the woman reportedly left the couple's country home, drove to the city, and met with *another man* named Joe Alan. Before the woman could leave, Alan's live-in girlfriend (Jessie Walker) arrived home to find the two embracing. Then, according to detective Kelley, Walker threatened to shoot the woman, and the woman fled to call 911 from the cellular phone she had left in her car. The woman explained the situation to the 911 operator who suspected the call was a prank. The phone conversation was cut off just before the woman was *shot and killed by Miss Walker*. The woman's husband could not be reached for an interview. According to Detective Kelley (who has worked in this area for 17 years) crimes like this one often occur in the university district, "*and in this situation it's the kind of thing we expect to occur.*"

## Appendix B (continued)

These two versions of the news story vary slightly in their wording and produced significant variation in attribution of blame. Differences in distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency showed to be influential. (Italics are inserted in the above vignettes to emphasize key statements).

- 1) In NEWS1, the implication is that the woman is innocently killed after learning of her husband's infidelity and confiding in a friend. In NEWS2, the woman is killed after it is suggested that she misconceived her husband's actions then mindlessly ran off to meet with another man.
- 2) NEWS 2 is higher in consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness. *Consensus* is established by the expert opinion of Detective Kelley (i.e., *worked in this area for 17 years*). The expert's statements also establish consistency (i.e., *crimes like this one often occur in the university district*), and distinctiveness (i.e., "and in this situation it's the kind of thing we expect to occur").
- 3) The statement in NEWS1, *Police are still investigating the crime*, simply creates additional ambiguity and is meant to further affect attribution.

## Appendix C

### First page of web-based study

**To participate in this study you must be age 18 or older.**  
Welcome.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If your instructor/professor offers extra credit or other compensation for participating in research studies, simply print out the last page of the study and bring it to class. Another benefit is that your participation can help researchers add to the body of knowledge and improve the lives of other people.

The results of this study may be published in professional journals. Confidentiality is assured to you on the part of the researchers. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

Participation in this study will take approximately 10-20 minutes. If you have any questions about this study please contact me: [lontzjam@msu.edu](mailto:lontzjam@msu.edu), or contact Dr. John Kosciulek by phone: (517) 353-9443, email address: [jkosciul@msu.edu](mailto:jkosciul@msu.edu), or regular mail: 458 Erickson Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824.

**Participants from Michigan State University:** If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact - anonymously, if you wish - Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D., Chair of the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCRIHS) by phone: (517) 355-2180, fax: (517) 432-4503, email address: [ucrihs@msu.edu](mailto:ucrihs@msu.edu), or regular mail: 202 Olds Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824.

**Participants from Gonzaga University:** If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact - anonymously, if you wish - Dr. Deborah McDonald in the Academic Vice President's Office of Gonzaga University by phone: (509) 323-6108, email address: [mcdonaldd@gonzaga.edu](mailto:mcdonaldd@gonzaga.edu), or regular mail: E. 502 Boone. Gonzaga University, GU: AD 99. Spokane, Washington. 99258-0099.

**Participants from University of Florida:** If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact - anonymously, if you wish - Ira S. Fischler, PhD, Chair of IRB-02 at the University of Florida by phone: (352) 392-0433, email address: [irb2@ufl.edu](mailto:irb2@ufl.edu), or regular mail: PO Box 112250., University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

If you would like to participate, please click this→ **“informed consent.”**

## Appendix D

### Informed Consent

Jameson Lontz, M.A., Doctoral Candidate  
Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology, and Special Education  
Michigan State University

### **Informed Consent**

1. The researchers in this study are interested in your opinions. You will be asked to read a newspaper article. You will then be asked to give your opinions about the characters in the article.
2. Willing participants are going to read the newspaper article, fill out a survey, then answer a few questions. The entire process will take approximately 10-20 minutes.
3. There are minimal risks to participation. Some participants may experience distress by reading the newspaper article because the article is about a disturbing event. If you have any questions regarding the study, please contact the researcher (Jameson Lontz) by phone: (517) 432-0843, email address: [lontzjam@msu.edu](mailto:lontzjam@msu.edu), or regular mail: 458 Erickson Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824. You may also contact Dr. John Kosciulek by phone: (517) 353-9443, email address: [jkosciul@msu.edu](mailto:jkosciul@msu.edu), or regular mail: 458 Erickson Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824.

**Participants from Michigan State University:** If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact - anonymously, if you wish - Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D., Chair of the University Committee on Research Involving

## Appendix D

### Informed Consent (continued)

Human Subjects (UCRIHS) by phone: (517) 355-2180, fax: (517) 432-4503, email address: [ucrihs@msu.edu](mailto:ucrihs@msu.edu), or regular mail: 202 Olds Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824.

**Participants from Gonzaga University:** If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact - anonymously, if you wish - Dr.

Deborah McDonald in the Academic Vice President's Office of Gonzaga University by phone: (509) 323-6108, email address: [mcdonaldd@gonzaga.edu](mailto:mcdonaldd@gonzaga.edu), or regular mail: E. 502 Boone. Gonzaga University, GU: AD 99. Spokane, WA 99258-0099.

**Participants from University of Florida:** If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact - anonymously, if you wish - Ira S.

Fischler, PhD, Chair of IRB-02 at the University of Florida by phone: (352) 392-0433, email address: [irb2@ufl.edu](mailto:irb2@ufl.edu), or regular mail: PO Box 112250., University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611. You may also contact Kenneth G. Rice, Ph.D. by regular mail: PSYCH Room 218. PO Box 112250. Gainesville, FL 32611-2250, phone: (352) 392-0601, or email: [kgr1@ufl.edu](mailto:kgr1@ufl.edu).

## Appendix D

### Informed Consent (continued)

If necessary, due to unanticipated distress from participation in this study, you will be referred to counselors at your university's counseling center:

**Michigan State University Counseling Center-** regular mail: 207 Student Services. East Lansing, MI 48824-1037, telephone: (517) 355-8270, or world wide web: [www.counseling.msu.edu](http://www.counseling.msu.edu).

**Gonzaga University Counseling and Career Assessment Center-** regular mail: AD BOX 94. Spokane, WA 99258-0094, telephone: (509)323-4054, or world wide web: [ccac@gonzaga.edu](mailto:ccac@gonzaga.edu).

**University of Florida Counseling Center-** regular mail: P301 Peabody Hall. University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611, telephone: (352) 392-1575, or world wide web: [www.counsel.ufl.edu](http://www.counsel.ufl.edu).

4. Confidentiality is assured to you on the part of the researchers. There will be no way of connecting your opinions in the study to your name. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.
5. Participation is voluntary, you may choose not to participate at all, or you may refuse to participate in certain procedures or answer certain questions or discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.
6. Participation in studies such as this one can be interesting to you and helpful to the general public. Participation in studies like this one will provide researchers with results that can be used to help the lives of others be more fulfilling.

## **Appendix D**

### **Informed Consent (continued)**

- 7. When you are done reading this page, you will read the newspaper article on the next page. After reading the newspaper article, you will give your opinions about characters in the article. Then you will read a posted statement by the researchers. After all of these steps, you will answer some questions about yourself such as your race/ethnicity, age, and year in college. There are no penalties if you do not complete participation in the study or choose to have your data withdrawn from the study.**
- 8. The study's data cannot be linked to individuals.**
- 9. By continuing after this page, you agree to participate in the study and have data collected from your responses included in the study's results.**



## Appendix E

### The Webpages

**(After being randomly assigned to read either NEWS1 or NEWS2, participants will be presented with the following web-pages)**

**The characters from the story you just read are listed below in order of appearance.**

**Please rank each character by clicking on the box corresponding to *your opinion of how responsible they were for the woman's death.***

	1st (most)	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th (least)
Woman	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Husband	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Betty Harrison	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Joe Alan	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Jessie Walker	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
911 Operator	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### Attribution Questionnaire

## Appendix E

### The Webpages (continued)

**Please click the box that indicates how much you agree with the actions of each character.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Woman	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Husband	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Betty Harrison	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Joe Alan	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Jessie Walker	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
911 Operator	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### Feelings Questionnaire

## Appendix E

### The Webpages (continued)

#### Demographics

People in this country originate from many places and have many different backgrounds. In order to gather an idea of the diversity of participants in this study, please answer the following questions.

My race (ethnicity) is: (click one)

- ☐ Asian or Asian American, including Chinese, Japanese, Pacific Islanders, and others
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino, including Mexican American, South American, Central American, and others
- ☐ White, Caucasian, Anglo, European American (non-Hispanic)
- ☐ American Indian or Native American
- ☐ Mixed (Parents are from two different groups)
- ☐ Middle Eastern
- ☐ If your race or ethnicity is not listed above, please type it in:

If you chose "Mixed" above, please specify the races/ethnicities of your parents

What was the highest annual income in your childhood home?						
less than \$20,000	\$20- 29,000	\$30- 45,000	\$46- 59,000	\$60- 75,000	\$76- 90,000	greater than \$90,000

What is your present annual household income?						
less than \$20,000	\$20- 29,000	\$30- 45,000	\$46- 59,000	\$60- 75,000	\$76- 90,000	greater than \$90,000

## Appendix E

### The Webpages (continued)

Please enter the name of the College/University that you attend or attended \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate your **completed** education by clicking the appropriate button:

☐ High School    ☐ 1 year college    ☐ 2 years college    ☐ 3 years college    ☐ 4 years college    ☐ 5+ years college

What is your present college class standing?				
Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Graduated or Pursuing a Graduate Degree
What is your major? _____				

Age:

Gender: ☐ M ☐ F

How did you hear about this study? \_\_\_\_\_

**Please click the  
"Submit" button below to send the survey data**

(The next page may take a moment to load)

## Appendix E

### The Webpages (continued)

#### **Debriefing Statement**

**(this statement appears on each participant's screen directly after submitting data)**

**The news story you just read was fabricated, not real, and any familiar characters or events are completely coincidental.**

If you feel personally distressed by participation in this study, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone: (517) 432-0843, email address: [lontzjam@msu.edu](mailto:lontzjam@msu.edu), or regular mail: 458 Erickson Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824. You may also contact Dr. John Kosciulek by phone: (517) 353-9443, email address: [jkosciul@msu.edu](mailto:jkosciul@msu.edu), or regular mail: 458 Erickson Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824.

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## Appendix E

### The Webpages (continued)

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**Gonzaga University Counseling and Career Assessment Center**- regular mail: AD BOX 94. Spokane, WA 99258-0094, telephone: (509)323-4054, or world wide web: [ccac@gonzaga.edu](mailto:ccac@gonzaga.edu).

**University of Florida Counseling Center**- regular mail: P301 Peabody Hall. University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611, telephone: (352) 392-1575, or world wide web: [www.counsel.ufl.edu](http://www.counsel.ufl.edu).

Please Click "continue" to complete the study: **Continue**

Appendix E

The Webpages (continued)

**This is the final page of the study  
(<http://www.msu.edu/~lontzjam/>)**

**Thank you for your participation!**

**If you have any questions about the purpose or nature of this study, you may  
contact me 5 months after your participation: [lontzjam@msu.edu](mailto:lontzjam@msu.edu)**

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Jameson Lontz, M.A.  
Doctoral Candidate  
Department of Counseling,  
Educational Psychology,  
and Special Education

Michigan State University

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