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Rachel Bressler March 29, 2017

Harming Others and Being Harmed: Attachment Style, Narrative Identity, and Transgression

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Abstract

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Most research on narratives of harm has examined narrators as agents of harm, meanwhile neglecting the possibility of the narrator as the recipient of the harm. However, within-person comparisons of transgressors and victims would bridge a wide gap in the literature on harming others and being harmed. Through an exploratory approach, the present study sought to address this gap, with the overall purpose being to investigate how college students narrate transgression experiences. Specifically, the present study asked two overarching questions: 1) how do narrators differentially described their own and others' experiences as both transgressors and victims; and 2) is there relationship between attachment style and narrative identity? Based on a sample of 198 undergraduate students, it was shown that transgressors and victims experienced harmful events in different ways, with emphasis on victim emotions and transgressor behaviors. It was also shown that, when the narrator perpetrated harm, attachment anxiety was inversely related to victim emotions. Overall, attention to behaviors and emotions in transgression narratives differed according to role in the event. Although narratives were self-focused, they also showed that narrators engaged in perspective taking and demonstrated empathy towards victims.

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Introduction

Attachment theory emphasizes the importance of intimate, interpersonal relationships. Through these experiences that begin very early in life, emotional bonds with close others are formed, creating a generalized mental framework for future relationships (i.e., an internal working model; Bowlby, 1979). These internal working models are associated with the security (or insecurity) of attachment and may be positive or negative, based on another person's willingness and ability to respond to one's needs of security, comfort, and care (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Importantly, empirical evidence has demonstrated that a more secure style of attachment is associated with superior interpersonal functioning, communication, and responsivity (e.g., Kestenbaum, Farber, & Sroufe, 1989; Laible & Thompson, 2000; Mikulincer et al., 2001), skills that may enhance the ability to maintain interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, those with a more secure attachment style, compared to those with an insecure attachment style, tend to consider behavioral consequences more, resolve conflict more constructively, and better understand society's moral standards (Kochanska & Thompson, 1997; Laible & Thompson, 2000; Senchak & Leonard, 1992).

Taken together, it is reasonable to presume that attachment security would play a role not only in forming interpersonal relationships but also in dealing with interpersonal conflict. That is, those with more secure attachments tend to communicate more effectively in relationships and think before acting, but when conflict inevitably occurs, they are also equipped to resolve it productively. Consequently, the security of one's attachment style may be related to one's behaviors, perceptions, and judgments of morally relevant situations, especially situations involving close others. Being able to make sense of moral experiences involving harm is essential to identity development and may vary by attachment style. A critical way in which

humans come to understand their identity is through the construction of narratives (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). A narrative identity is defined as the self's subjective understanding of an experience. The formation of narrative identity is linked with the ability to integrate, reason, and synthesize to derive meaning from an experience, which is a capability that emerges throughout adolescence and early adulthood (Fivush, 2011; Habermas & Bluck, 2000). The construction of narratives of transgression, both about harming others and being harmed, provides a link between attachment style and morality, which contributes to greater understanding of the self in a complex, social world and underscores the importance of interpersonal relationships. Pursuant to this link, the overall objective of the present study is to examine attachment style and narrative identity in narratives of transgression during emerging adulthood, when identity is a primary developmental task.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory highlights the significance of interpersonal relationships beginning in infancy and continuing into adulthood. At the frontier of attachment theory, John Bowlby (1979, 1982, 2012) focused on attachment to primary caregivers, theorizing about and exploring the processes through which infants form emotional attachments to their caregivers and their reactions (e.g., emotional distress) when separated from caregivers. Based on observation and controlled experiments, Mary Ainsworth further identified three distinct types of attachment in infants – secure, avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent – based on their specific, distinguishable behavior patterns (Ainsworth, 1979; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 2015). The classifications were based on infant behaviors in the mothers' presence, during separation, and during reunion, and were related to the accessibility and responsivity of the mother to the infant (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Ainsworth and colleagues observed that securely attached infants:

explored the environment using their mothers simply as a secure base; experienced a minor amount of separation anxiety when their mother was absent, but maintained a positive working model of her; and greeted her positively when reunited. On the other hand, avoidant and anxious infants, classified broadly by an insecure attachment style, had a negative working model of an unresponsive and inaccessible mother. Avoidant infants generally did not experience separation anxiety, rarely showed distress when separated, and often displayed avoidant behaviors (e.g., ignoring) upon reunion. Anxious infants displayed intense anxiety about their attachment relationship; separation caused extreme distress, whereas reunion evoked ambivalence (e.g., they sought and then resisted close contact; Ainsworth, 1979; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991).

Stability of attachment. Bowlby maintained that attachment behavior would be relatively stable and would characterize individuals' attachment to important others in their lives "from cradle to grave". Primary support for this argument comes from Hazan and Shaver's (1987) findings that the three styles of infant attachment were observed in adulthood and the same proportions of adults exhibited each of these styles as in infancy, with secure attachment accounting for more than 50% of subjects. Additional support comes from Allen and colleagues' (2004) 2-year, longitudinal study, which examined continuity and discontinuity in attachment security in a population of mid- to late-adolescents at ages 16 and 18. The results demonstrated that there was, in fact, significant stability in overall levels of attachment security over the two years. In conjunction, these findings indicate that there is general stability in attachment security over time, and if individual differences over time arise, they may be accounted for by psychosocial, relational, or intrapsychic factors. Stability of attachment relations across childhood and adulthood suggest that individuals have characteristic ways of understanding the self, others, and the world based on early attachment experiences.

Internal working models. A critical mechanism for stability of attachment over time is based on Bowlby's notion of internal working models (IWMs), in which early experiences of the self and others are internalized and represent a generalized framework for future experiences and relationships. Humans depend strongly on others to provide security, comfort, and care, and those with attachment figures who satisfy these needs consistently and completely would have a positive IWM of the relationship that represents a responsive and available individual (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). The IWMs that are constructed early in development (e.g., of the primary caregiver) are consistent and stable throughout one's later experiences, particularly in adult romantic relationships, and serve to guide future behavior. In addition, having a positive IWM of both the self and others can predict relationship satisfaction (Kachadourian, Fincham & Davila, 2004), as well as the quality of and beliefs about relationship experiences (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Overall, attachment style and IWMs are expected to remain relatively stable over time and may be predictive of future relationship experiences.

Interpersonal relationships. In interpersonal relationships, attachment is related to one's willingness and ability to form an emotional bond with another person, to have a successful and satisfying relationship, to be reactive to the needs of another person, and to communicate well with someone (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Laible & Thompson, 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), which contributes to positive relationship experiences. In mother-child discourse, attachment style predicts communication skills and conversational style, such that both mothers and children tend to be more emotionally open and honest when the attachment relationship is more secure (Laible & Thompson, 2000). A more secure attachment style is generally associated with greater responsivity to the needs of others, demonstration of empathy, and prosocial engagement (Kestenbaum, Farber, & Sroufe, 1989; Mikulincer et al., 2001). Similarly, securely attached

individuals tend to think through the consequences of their actions more thoroughly than insecurely attached individuals (Laible & Thompson, 2000). Thus, the security of attachment can bolster the ability to feel close to another person and can enrich relationship experiences. Therefore, it is important to study attachment in intimate and personally significant relationships.

While attachment security can enhance relationship experiences, occasional interpersonal conflict, tension, or transgression in close relationships is an unavoidable part of human nature. In the event of interpersonal conflict, attachment style predicts conflict resolution behaviors, such that those with a more secure style of attachment exhibit more constructive, rather than destructive, conflict resolution (Senchak & Leonard, 1992). The willingness and ability of those with secure attachments to engage in positive and constructive behaviors to resolve an interpersonal conflict may be attributed, in part, to their positive IWMs. That is, the discord resulting from such a wrongdoing would be inconsistent with their internal representation of the relationship, thereby promoting positive outcomes, rather than negative ones. In addition, securely attached individuals are more likely than insecurely attached individuals to forgive a transgression committed by their partner (Kachadourian, Fincham & Davila, 2004), and they are also more likely to feel guilty after committing a transgression (Laible & Thompson, 2000). The IWMs of early family relationships may play a particularly significant role because these early experiences inform children about the behavioral expectations and moral standards of the social world and provide a model for future interactions (Kochanska & Thompson, 1997; Thompson, 1998).

College students. Although attachment does remain relatively stable over time, the influence of attachment style may be stronger in certain social and interpersonal contexts, often coinciding with periods of transitions. Going to college, for example, is a major transition, in

large part because until adulthood, most humans tend to rely on their parents for support and resources (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). During childhood and adolescence, it is expected that parents will provide support and encourage autonomy in early adulthood and beyond, which is typical in secure parent-child relationships (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003; Settersten & Ray, 2010). As a result, attachment style is related to academic and social adjustment to college, independence, interpersonal functioning, and identity exploration and commitment (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003; Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004; Meeus et al., 2002). For many young adults in the United States, enhanced personal and social adjustment to college can be predicted by greater attachment-related emotional support and less dependence on the family (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003). Similarly, Mattanah, Hancock, and Brand (2004) reported a significant relationship between positive adjustment to college and a secure attachment relationship with parents for college students in the United States. Thus, the importance of studying attachment in college students in general is that it underscores the influence of early relationships, social contexts, and identity exploration and commitment during a period of major change.

In sum, since securely and insecurely attached individuals differ in their experiences in intimate relationships and their IWMs of both the self and others, it is logical to expect that attachment style would also have a part in moderating interpretations and depictions of personally-relevant interpersonal interactions, both negative and positive. With narrative identity being a way in which an individual can make sense of personal experiences, attachment style should be a factor that accounts for individual differences in narrative construction. In the meaning making process, certain styles of attachment can moderate narrative style of different events (Graci & Fivush, 2016). Thus, those with more secure attachments should perceive,

respond to, and reflect on moral and emotional events in a distinct manner from those with less secure attachments.

Why Narrative?

Narratives are coordinated and subjective linguistic configurations that connect multiple related occurrences via causal links and provide a schema for understanding an event overall (Fivush, 2011). In other words, narratives provide a structured form for communicating an experience to others and the self, through which self-understanding and self-definition can be enhanced (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). They not only offer information about the unfolding of an event, but they also provide insight into interpretations and evaluations of the experience (Wainryb et al., 2005). Further, via the construction of narratives, individuals can derive insight about who they are, make meaning in their lives, and understand experiences as resulting from goal-based actions (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2013; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). Examining narratives in the study of transgression and attachment security is important because narratives, like IWMs, are subjective representations of experiences. Through narratives, individuals can better understand motivations, goals, and actions of the self and others, and they can draw connections about their interpersonal relationships and their experiences. Thus, it seems that attachment style is a factor related to narrative construction and narrative identity.

Narrative Identity

Narrative identity is an individual's subjective and ongoing life story that incorporates experiences of the recollected past, the extant present, and the envisioned future to provide a sense purpose and meaning in relation to one's self-understanding (McAdams, 2008, 2013; McAdams & McLean, 2013). It is not only a means of expressing the self as who one is now, who one was in the past, and who one wants to be in the future, but it is also the meaningful

integration and coherent synthesis of these selves as continuous in time (Fivush, 2011; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2008, 2013). This understanding is subjective and unique to the self. Therefore, individual differences in narrative construction and content (e.g., plots, themes) are key to the study of narrative identity (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2008), and given the previous discussion, may vary as a function of attachment style.

Emerging/early adulthood. The development of narrative identity is a critical, but complex, process of understanding one's experiences. According to Erikson's (1993) theory of psychosocial development, the teenage years (i.e., adolescence) and the emerging adult years are critical for the formation of identity more broadly, as this is the stage in which individuals seek to answer certain fundamental questions regarding their developing identities: Who am I? How did I get here? Where am I going? The next stage, occurring in early adulthood, is intimacy versus isolation, in which the critical questions involve the ability to develop intimate, interpersonal relationships. Narrative identity matures throughout adulthood as understandings of life experiences become more detailed and personalized (Fivush, 2011; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2013; McAdams & McLean, 2013). The ability to integrate, remember, reason, and narrate an important experience and derive meaning from it is one that emerges in adolescence (Fivush, 2011; Habermas & Bluck, 2000), underscoring the significance of narrative identity at this point in development. Furthermore, whereas children struggle with the integration of elements of past events, the use of causal connections and chronology, and the conceptualization of themes, adolescents and young adults typically do not (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2013). Throughout and beyond the adulthood years, the self continuously revises the life narrative and self-understanding to include its current perspectives on and interpretations of the past, present, and future selves to update the evolving narrative (McAdams,

2013). Thus, it is critical to study narrative identity in early adulthood, as the self is better able to make sense of an experience through more detailed and meaningful representations and a more holistic view of the self and others (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2008, 2013).

College students. The beginning of adulthood is a major transition period, filled with changing responsibilities, priorities, and experiences. Settersten and Ray (2010) explain that the path to adulthood has fluctuated with historic changes in social and familial expectations, economic uncertainty, and workforce opportunity, and this transition process is also influenced by demographic factors such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status. For many young people in present-day Western society, the transition to adulthood has traditionally encompassed five fundamental steps: leaving home, finishing school, becoming employed, getting married, and starting a family (Settersten & Ray, 2010). Specifically, the college years are thought of as a time for self-exploration, a time to find oneself, a time to figure out who one is and what one's purpose is. Because parents usually provide a significant amount of support (e.g., financially, emotionally, etc.), being an adult requires obtaining a degree of autonomy, and going to college is an opportunity for independence, away from parental influence (Settersten & Ray, 2010). As a result, it is important to study narrative identity in college students specifically because their unique period of transition and social environment will bring about new experiences, relationships, and understandings (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2013). Narrative identity can be shaped by social contexts and relationships, which give the foundations for "learning narrative skills, shaping identity expectations, and formulating a meaningful story for one's life" (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 236-7). Additionally, identity is shaped by one's goals, motivations, and priorities, which may fluctuate over time. These variations are reflected in what one considers important life events and in the meaning that is derived from those events

(McAdams, 2008). The college years provide a novel environment in which self-understanding can develop. Therefore, studying college students, who are beginning a new and complicated chapter of their lives, provides insight into identity and personality development in early adulthood because narrative identity not only changes in age-related ways over time but it can also be shaped by the social environment.

Interpersonal relationships. In addition to continuously developing over time, narrative identity also develops in a social context and can be influenced by early experiences and interpersonal relationships (Fivush, 2011; McAdams, 2008), which connects it to attachment theory. Personal stories collected over time typically tend to involve close others, which may partially stem from the basic human needs for comfort and care, as well as the early importance placed on those with whom one has close relationships (e.g., parents) for fulfilling those needs (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). These early social relationships typically occur within the family or peer settings, and parenting style and parental communication can affect later development of personality and attainment of certain skills and abilities. For example, parent-child conversations with highly elaborative, emotionally open, and responsive mothers are predictive of children's development of autobiographical memory skills, early conscience development, and moral agency in childhood and adolescence (Fivush, 2011; Laible & Thompson, 2000; Recchia et al., 2014). Influenced by the working models of previous experiences, peer relationships also become an important interpersonal context throughout adolescence and adulthood (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010), providing novel interpersonal experiences and shaping identity. Finally, interpersonal conflict experiences often occur in close relationships (e.g., familial, peer, romantic), but one's ability to manage such a situation, to view the self and others as moral beings, and to meaningfully narrate the experience may vary by attachment status.

Moral Identity and Moral Agency

A critical component of identity is moral identity. Moral identity influences moral action and self-definition through beliefs and values such as honesty and compassion (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016). Moral identity and narrative identity may become interconnected through the narrative construction of moral experiences. These morally relevant narratives involve an incompatibility between one's actions and beliefs, which generally include harm caused to the self and others (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). Moral identity, in addition to moral judgments and moral emotions, may be a predictor of moral behavior, although one's view of the self as a moral being may not always be consistent with actual behavior (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016). In turn, this inconsistency between moral identity and moral behavior creates a tension between one's actions and beliefs. How one comes to understand these moral events is related to moral development, specifically the development of moral agency.

Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010) defined moral agency as "people's understanding and experience of themselves (and others) as agents whose morally relevant actions are based in goals and beliefs" (p. 55). Moral agency develops through the process of understanding the self and others as complex, moral beings and making sense of the fact that one's actions can result in harm to another. Narratives allow for moral reflections, providing insight into one's goals, motives, and values and guiding moral behavior (McAdams, 2013). How individuals narrate their moral experiences, including their own and other's harmful behaviors, is critical to moral agency and identity (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010; Recchia, Wainryb, & Pasupathi, 2013). Thus, narrative identity is connected to moral agency, such that understanding a moral experience and making sense of one's harmful actions in a meaningful, interconnected way can function as a guide for self-definition, future behavior, and identity development.

Transgression

Because moral agency is associated with narrative identity, it is important to examine narratives of moral experiences in which there is conflict between one's actions and values. One such experience is a transgression, which can be operationalized as an action (or a lack of action) that is construed as hurtful, causes harm to another, and is inconsistent with one's values and beliefs. Because a transgression calls into question one's sense of moral agency and views on right and wrong, it is important to identify and understand the interpretations of these morally conflicting experiences (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). Overall, narrating transgression experiences committed by the self and others can reveal how one makes sense of a moral event, and such an understanding tends to include consequences and justifications, psychological contents, and both one's own and others' actions, beliefs, goals, and emotions (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010).

Interpersonal relationships. In addition to transgressions resulting from a trade-off between one's actions and beliefs, transgressions may also occur because of a discrepancy between the wants of one individual and those of another (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010; Wainryb et al., 2005). Consequently, transgressions are inherently interpersonal and often are committed against those with whom one has a close relationship (e.g., family, friends, partners). A transgression experience would include *who* was involved, *what* happened, *why* and *how* the event unfolded, and *how* it felt. The nature and type of relationship, which is related to attachment style, is thought to distinctly influence interpretations and judgments of moral experiences (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010; Recchia, Wainryb, & Pasupathi, 2013), which would be reflected in narratives of harmful events. Importantly, the variability in conceptions of and experience with interpersonal relationships overall may be based on relationship histories and

attachment security. Those with more secure attachment styles are not only more empathic and prosocial in general, but they also view transgressions as being inconsistent with their IWMs of the self and others (Kestenbaum, Farber, & Sroufe, 1989; Kochanska & Thompson, 1997; Mikulincer et al., 2001). Thus, early interpersonal relationships, particularly those within the family, are critical to both attachment style and moral identity in shaping future development and experiences, as well as guiding social and moral standards (Kochanska & Thompson, 1997; Thompson, 1998). As a result, interpretations of transgression experiences through narratives may be influenced by the social environment and interpersonal relationships, which are inextricably tied to attachment style.

Early adulthood. The development of moral agency is expected to change over time and develop with age, in a similar fashion as narrative identity. The ability to achieve a sense of moral agency through narratives about harm develops throughout childhood and is augmented by the simultaneous development of other abilities, such as theory of mind, perspective taking, self-understanding, and identity construction (Erikson, 1993; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Recchia, Wainryb, & Pasupathi, 2013; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010; Wainryb & Brehl, 2006). With increasing age, children and adolescents become better able to acknowledge the consequences of their behaviors, understand the harm caused, and incorporate multiple perspectives of a situation (Recchia, Wainryb, & Pasupathi, 2013). Thus, because young adults seem to have a better sense of moral agency and the self, they tend to be better able to integrate their emotions, beliefs, desires, and cognitions to make meaning out of their own and others' harmful behaviors (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010).

Perspective. Interpersonal transgressions can be narrated from the perspective of the perpetrator of the harm or from that of the recipient of the harm. Although limited literature

exists on the topic, research conducted by Wainryb et al. (2005) sought to understand how children's moral judgments and evaluations of interpersonal transgressions varied according to the narrator's perspective. They found that moral conflict situations were narrated differently depending on if the event was experienced as a perpetrator or as a victim. Specifically, narratives about being harmed tended to self-centered with a strong focus on their own victim emotions, whereas narratives about harming others were more focused on the intentions of the perpetrator and the emotions and mental states of the victim. Furthermore, with age, increases in both the demonstration of moral concerns for others and the psychological content (e.g., emotions) of harm narratives have been observed (Recchia, Wainryb, & Pasupathi, 2013). Throughout the lifespan, humans are better able to understand and demonstrate empathy, perspective taking, and reactions to the needs of others, which are further augmented by a secure attachment style. Thus, the ability to consider the overt and covert experiences of another, even if they are different from one's own experiences, is something that likely varies according one's role and perspective in the experience, develops with age, and is related to attachment security and the influence of interpersonal relationships.

The Present Study

Comparing within-person similarities and differences in narratives of transgression from both perspectives of perpetrator and victim would provide novel insight into interpersonal relationships and morality and would address a wide gap in the literature on harming others versus being harmed (Recchia, Wainryb, & Pasupathi, 2013). The present study seeks to address this gap by examining college students' narratives about harm and asking two related questions: 1) how do narrators differentially describe their own (and others') experiences as transgressor as compared to victim; and 2) how do narrators describe their own experiences as transgressor or

victim as compared to describing others' experiences as transgressor or victim? Wainryb et al. (2005) established that transgressors and victims perceive, interpret, and narrate moral experiences differently, but there remains little empirical evidence examining this question. Thus, the present study took an exploratory approach to analyzing these narratives. The focus was on examining narrative expression of behaviors, thoughts, and emotions to explore how narrators understand both their own and others' experiences. In addition, because of the inherently interpersonal nature of transgression and the influence of attachment style on morality and socialization, the present study also examined the potential relationship between narrative identity and attachment security, predicting an association between a secure attachment style and attention to emotions of the self and others. In sum, the primary intentions of the present study are (1) to examine narrative depictions of the self and other; (2) to identify narrative differences between transgressor and victim roles; and (3) to determine if a relation between attachment style and narrative identity exists.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and twenty-one students participated in the larger study, but twenty-three were excluded from analysis for incomplete or off-topic narratives. Thus, the present study's sample included one hundred and ninety-eight undergraduate students, between the ages of 18 and 24 years (M_{age} = 19.10, SD = 1.14). Participants were recruited from an Introductory Psychology course at Emory University. The sample included 112 females (56.6%) and 86 males (43.4%). Of the 198 participants, 43.9% identified as White or Caucasian, 28.8% identified as Southeast Asian or Pacific Islander, 9.1% identified as Black or African-American, 5.1%

identified as Latino/a, 4.0% identified as Indio-Asian, 2.0% identified as Middle Eastern, and 7.1% identified with multiple ethnicities.

Procedure

Study participants were recruited through an online course system at Emory University during two consecutive academic semesters. Data were collected as part of a larger study, in which students were asked to complete a battery of self-report questionnaires and respond to four narrative prompts; the present study considered two transgression-centered narratives and the measure reported below. The study was completed in a single online session and participants finished in approximately 45 minutes. Upon completion of participation, students received course credit in Introductory Psychology. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Materials

Attachment style. Attachment style was measured using the Experiences in Close Relationship Scale – Short Form (ECR-S; Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007; see Appendix A). The ECR-S is a twelve-item rating scale used to assess attachment style in adult romantic relationships. The scale asked respondents for an indication of how well each statement represented their typical feelings in romantic relationships (sample item, *"I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner"*). Respondents rated their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The ECR-S includes subscales of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, with six items for the Avoidance subscale (sample item, *"I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back"*) and six items for the Anxiety subscale (sample item, *"I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them"*). Sufficient

reliability has been shown for the Anxiety subscale (α = .73) and the Avoidance subscale (α = .82).

Narrative prompts and coding. Participants were asked to write two detailed narratives about a specific experience with a close other that resulted in harm to one of the parties involved. The first narrative was written from the perspective of the transgressor about a time when the narrator hurt someone, and the second narrative was written from the perspective of the victim about a time when someone hurt the narrator.

> 1) Transgressor Perspective
> Please think about a specific time when you did or said something and someone close to you, like a family member or friend, ended up feeling hurt by it. Describe that experience in as much detail as possible. What are the things that come to mind about that event, reflecting back on it? Is there any lesson or "bottom line" you take away from that event? What were your thoughts and feelings about that experience?
>
> 2) Victim Perspective
> Please think about a specific time when someone close to you, like a family member or friend, did or said something and you felt hurt by it. Describe that experience in as much detail as possible. What are the first things that come to mind about that event? How do you now understand that event, reflecting back on it? Is there any lesson or "bottom line" you take away from that event? What were your thoughts and feelings about that experience?

Each set of narratives was coded for a series of codes involving the nature of the transgression and each partner's responses to the transgression. See Appendix B for the complete coding schemes and coding reliability scores. First, narratives were coded categorically for the partner involved in the interaction. Partners were classified as older family members (e.g., parents, aunts/uncles, grandparents), similar-age family members (e.g., siblings, cousins), peers (e.g., friends, coworkers, classmates), romantic partners (e.g., boyfriend/girlfriend), or unidentified partners. The remaining coded items were adapted from Wainryb and colleagues' (2005) coding scheme. Narratives were coded for several narrative elements; references to psychological processes (i.e., behaviors, mental states, and emotions) of both transgressors and

victims were coded on a continuous scale, while inclusions of resolutions to the event were coded on a dichotomous yes-no scale. For all codes, a two-person coding team coded approximately 20% of the narratives together to build reliability. After building reliability, the remaining narratives were independently coded for these items. Any disagreements among commonly coded items were resolved through consensus meetings.

Results

The present study analyzed two types of narratives about transgression in close, interpersonal relationships: one in which the narrator harmed someone else and one in which the narrator was harmed by another. Across narrative types, most transgressions involved instances of cheating, lying, betraying trust, and/or causing offense. Although some of the narrated experiences included minor physical actions (e.g., pushing, slapping, etc.), very few described intense physical altercations or were centered on physical behavior as the main transgression.

Table 1 displays the frequencies for partner and narrative resolutions. For both types of narratives, the most common type of partner involved in the narrated transgression was a peer (e.g., friend, coworker, classmate; 45.5%), followed by an older family member (e.g., parents, aunt/uncle, grandparents; 28.8%). Almost half of all narratives (48.7%) included references to the event's denouement. The most common types of narrated resolutions included apologies, reconciliation, ignoring the event, avoiding the other person, and changes to the relationship (both positive and negative). Resolutions to the event were present in 52.0% of narratives about harming others, whereas 45.5% of narratives about being harmed included resolutions. Of the 198 participants in the study, resolutions were described in both narratives by 57 (28.8%); in neither narrative by 62 (31.3%); in only the harming others narrative by 45 (22.7%); and in only the being harmed narrative by 34 (17.2%).

Harming Others versus Being Harmed

The first set of analyses focused on possible differences in the narratives as a function of the person and the role. First, paired sample *t*-tests were conducted on how the narrator described the self as both transgressor and victim compared to how the narrator described the other person as both transgressor and victim. Subsequent paired sample *t*-tests were then conducted to examine possible differences in how the narrator described the self as transgressor compared to the self as victim, as well as differences in how the narrator described the other person as transgressor compared to the other person as victim. Descriptive statistics of the narrative elements are displayed in Table 2, and the statistical results of the paired sample *t*-test analyses are displayed in Table 3. For all analyses, the *p*-value used to determine significance was set at .05.

In terms of the first question, differences in narrative descriptions of self compared to other can be seen graphically in Figure 1 and numerically in Table 3, which display the mean differences of the behaviors, mental states, and emotions for both perspectives, along with all *t* and *p* values. The results indicate that narrators focus on their own mental states and emotions more than the other person's mental states and emotions, regardless of their role as transgressor or victim. In contrast, narrators emphasize the other person's behaviors more than their own behaviors, but only when the other person is the victim. No significant difference in transgressor behaviors was found.

The second question conceptualizes narrative differences in another way by evaluating the self as transgressor compared to victim and the other person as transgressor compared to victim. Table 3 displays the mean differences in references to narrators' own behaviors, mental states, and emotions for the self as transgressor and victim, as well as the mean differences for

the other person's behaviors, mental states, and emotions as transgressor and victim, along with all *t* and *p* values. For visual representations of references to own responses and to partner responses, see Figures 2 and 3, respectively. In terms of the self, narrators describe their own behaviors more as the transgressor than as the victim, but describe their own emotions more as the victim than as the transgressor. When referencing the other person, narrators similarly focus on transgressor behaviors more than victim behaviors and focus on victim emotions more than transgressor emotions.

Attachment Style

Attachment style was analyzed using the anxiety ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.03$) and avoidance ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.06$) subscales of the ECR-S. To assess the relationship between attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance with the narrative elements, Pearson correlations were used and the *p*-value to determine significance was set at .05 (See Table 4). A significant negative correlation was found between anxiety and references to the other person's emotions as the victim. In other words, a higher score on the anxiety subscale was associated with fewer references to the victim's emotions in narratives about harming others. No other significant correlations were supported between references to transgression responses and reports on the ECR-S.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate narrative identity in narratives of transgression about harming others and being harmed and to evaluate potential associations with attachment style. The first objective was to examine differences in narrative descriptions of the behaviors, mental states, and emotions of the self as compared to the other person in the same role. Second, the present study examined differences in narrative descriptions of transgressors

compared to victims for both the self and the other person. The final objective was to determine if a relationship existed between these narrative descriptions and attachment security.

When analyzing differences in narratives of harming others as compared to narratives of being harmed, several interesting patterns were identified, which supported Wainryb et al.'s (2005) broad assertion that transgressors and victims have different moral conflict experiences, and these differences are evident in the narrative construction of harmful events. In general, both types of narratives tended to be self-focused, with narrators describing their own mental states and emotions more than the other person's mental states and emotions, regardless of their role in the event. Although narrators described personal inner states more often than inner states of the other person, there was an opposing trend for one instance of behavior references. Participants tended to reference the other person's behaviors more than their own when discussing their role as transgressors. Transgressor behaviors were not significantly different when comparing the narrator to the other person. A likely explanation is that the behaviors of the transgressor – regardless of who is in that role – initiate the event, and therefore their actions are necessarily discussed in similar detail. Taken together, these results suggest that transgression experiences are narrated with an emphasis on the internal thoughts and feelings of the self, but also attend to the other person's overt and observable behaviors (particularly as a victim). Specifically, narrative construction involves a great deal of reflection and recollection in terms of the experience, which involves thinking about what, why, and how the event happened, who was involved, and how everyone was affected. Therefore, narrators look within to their own interpretations, thoughts, and feelings surrounding the experience, while also reflecting on the external behaviors of the other person, more so than others' internal states. In other words, narratives of transgression involve and elicit a great deal of inner reflection, which comes more

easily and naturally for the self, and thus inner reflection focuses on the self as either transgressor or victim. This pattern is illustrated in the following two narratives. In the first, the narrator is the transgressor, whereas in the second, the narrator is the victim.

> Case 21, Narrative 1) "This past winter break, I wanted to plan something fun with my friends for New Years Eve. I was spending the entire break with my parents in Florida, and I wanted to go up to New York to see my friends. Every New Years Eve, I spend the night with my family and they always end up falling asleep early. I decided that I wanted to do something fun with friends instead this year and that I should go up to see them instead of spending it with my parents. When I told them, they got very offended. They thought it was because I didn't think they were fun and that I didn't like spending time with them. I tried to explain to them that spending New Years with your family on a couch was not enjoyable for me, and they ended up letting me go. However, they were still very hurt by the experience even though they won't admit it."

> Case 21, Narrative 2) "One of the friends that I have in college is a friend that I do everything with. We eat together and have fun together and study together. Even if we aren't doing everything with each other every day, we still invite each other to come with and the other one knows what they are doing. However, one day last week, my friend went out to dinner with our mutual friends and didn't tell me. When I found out that she went to get dinner without me, I was pretty upset and hurt. I explained to her how I felt, and she understood and realized that she could've told me her plans and included me."

In the first narrative, Jane (a pseudonym) includes a significant amount of reflection on and recollection of the event, including her motivation for the transgression, how she approached and justified the situation, and how the event was resolved. Although she is focused on herself – what she did and what she wanted – she also references how her parents felt (e.g., they were offended) and takes their perspective (e.g., they thought she did not want to spend time with them). In the second narrative in which Jane is the victim, she maintains a focus on herself. She includes what her friend did that was hurtful, but the main emphasis is on how Jane felt, why she felt hurt, and what she did in response. She also engages in perspective taking in the end, but only by indicating that her friend came to realize that what she did was hurtful.

In assessing narrative descriptions of the role of transgressor as compared to the role of the victim, the results indicated that narrators described the self and others in similar ways. That is, narrative descriptions of transgressors compared to victims produced similar patterns for both self and other, even though comparing the narrator to the other person in the same role yielded significant mean differences. First, transgressor behaviors were included more than victim behaviors regardless of the role of the narrator, as can be seen in the narratives above. Both narratives include specific references to the transgressor behaviors, which tend to be the primary starting point for the transgression. As mentioned previously, the transgressor's behavior is a critical component to the narrative holistically and is described in both narrative types. Further, the responses of the victims are more internalized, rather than overt behavioral reactions. Thus, from both perspectives and for both people, transgressor behaviors were included more than victim behaviors.

Conversely, for both the narrator and the other person, victim emotions were referenced more than transgressor emotions, which is logical given that being harmed by someone close to you is a highly emotional and hurtful experience. Interestingly, on average for both narrative types, transgressor behavior was the mostly commonly referenced element, followed closely by victim emotion. Given that narrating an experience requires thoughtful introspection and that being a victim is very emotional, it may not seem entirely unexpected that narrators describe their own emotions more in the victim role compared to the transgressor role. However, it is surprising that the other person's emotions were referenced more as the victim because the narrator would have had to think deeply about how the other person was feeling after being harmed, which would imply empathy and perspective taking on the part of the narrator. As demonstrated in the first narrative above, Jane considers how her parents felt when she

committed the transgression against them. She shows empathy towards them by considering how they felt, acknowledging that she knew she had hurt them, and taking their perspective. Further, Jane displays empathy by indicating that she knows they are hurt despite verbal denials of their emotional injury.

Another interesting idea to consider when thinking about behaviors and emotions, particularly for victims, is how narrators articulated the events. For example, a victim's response to a transgression could be narrated by saying "She was very sad" or by saying "She cried". The first would be considered an emotion, while the latter a behavior. Further, consider this: "She looked so sad, I thought she was going to cry." Because it was found that there were more references to victim emotions, the indication was that narrators contemplate the internal feelings of the victims, in addition to their external behaviors.

Although the present study observed several very interesting and significant differences in narratives about harming others and being harmed, only one significant correlation with attachment style emerged. For narratives from the transgressor perspective, there was an inverse relationship between references to the victim's emotions and attachment anxiety. That is, the more anxiously attached someone was, the less they described the other person's emotions as the victim. The negative correlation was surprising because anxiously attached individuals tend to engage in rumination and over-analyze their experiences and relationships, likely stemming from their deep fear of being rejected or abandoned (Ainsworth, 1979; Burnette et al., 2009; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). In addition, based on previous literature suggesting a potential relationship between attachment and narrative (Dykas et al., 2006; Graci & Fivush, 2016), it was surprising that only one narrative element was correlated. These results may be explained by the relatively secure style of the sample or the quantitative analysis of the narratives.

Future Directions and Limitations

A few limitations of the present study exist, which future research should address. The first concerns generalizability. The scores from the self-report attachment measure indicate that the sample of college students was relatively secure. Consequently, the results may not be generalizable to other populations (i.e., less secure populations). Future research on this topic should address this limitation by screening initially for attachment style to study a more demographically diverse or less secure group, as well as studying populations of different ages and education levels. Further, although the focus of the present study was specifically to examine moral reasoning and narrative identity in an emerging adult college sample in the United States as described in the introduction, it is important to note that possible cultural differences may limit the study's generalizability as well. In addition, the present study's approach to analyzing narrative identity was principally quantitative, by measuring the occurrences of narrative elements, rather than the content within them. That is, a quantitative approach addresses *what* is narrated, whereas a qualitative approach would address *how* it is narrated. Future studies could address this limitation by examining narratives of transgression more qualitatively (e.g., what types of behaviors were discussed). Finally, although many narrators provided background information and/or post-event reflections, the coding scheme of the present study mandated that only the content of the transgression event itself could be coded, meaning that certain parts of the narratives were not coded. In the future, researchers may adapt a coding scheme that allows for other aspects of the narrative to be coded.

Conclusion

In sum, the objective of the present study was to compare victims' and perpetrators' narratives of transgression by analyzing differences in narratives about harming others versus

those about being harmed. In narrating their own and others' moral experiences, narrators tended to focus on themselves, describing their own internal states more than the other person's, regardless of their role in the transgression event. When describing the experience, narrators described both their own and others' emotions more as a victim and their own and others' behaviors more as a transgressor. Therefore, although narratives tended to be self-focused, narrators also demonstrated empathy and compassion for the other person. Thus, there is a difference in the ways in which victims and transgressors experience transgressions.

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Appendix A

Experiences in Close Relationship Scale - Short Form

Instruction: The following statements concern how you feel in romantic relationships. We are interested in how you generally experience relationships, not just in what is happening in a current relationship. Respond to each statement by indicating how much you agree or disagree with it. Mark your answer using the following rating scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

1. **It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need.**
2. I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner.
3. I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back.
4. I find that my partner(s) don't want to get as close as I would like.
5. **I turn to my partner for many things, including comfort and reassurance.**
6. My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.
7. I try to avoid getting too close to my partner.
8. **I do not often worry about being abandoned.**
9. **I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my partner.**
10. I get frustrated if romantic partners are not available when I need them.
11. I am nervous when partners get too close to me.
12. I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them.

Scoring Information:
Anxiety = 2, 4, 6, 8 (reverse), 10, 12
Avoidance = 1 (reverse), 3, 5 (reverse), 7, 9 (reverse), 11

Appendix B

Moral Responses Coding Scheme

Coding Category	Description	Reliability
Partner		$\kappa = .96$
Older Family	Parents, aunts/uncles, grandparents	
Similar-Age Family	Siblings, cousins	
Peer	Friend, coworker, classmate	
Romantic Partner	Boyfriend/girlfriend	
Unidentified	Partner is not identified	
Conflict Narrative Elements		
Behaviors		$\alpha = .83$
Transgressor's Harmful Behaviors	References to perpetrator's behavior or speech that resulted in harm to the victim (*e.g., Me and my friend were in a fight and I pushed him over.*)	
Victim's Behavioral Responses	References to victim's actions following perpetrator's harmful behavior (*e.g., So I went inside and told the teacher that he hit me.*)	
Mental States		$\alpha = .74$
Narrator's Mental States	Narrator's references to own thought processes (*e.g., I didn't want to say anything because I knew it would hurt her feelings.*)	
Other Person's Mental States	References to the other person's thought processes, which were a) communicated to the narrator, b) inferred from behavior, or c) narrator did not indicate source (e.g., *He wanted to play a different game.*)	
Emotional States		$\alpha = .91$
Narrator's Emotions	Narrator's references to own feelings (*e.g., And that made me really mad.*)	
Other Person's Emotions	References to the other person's feelings, which were a) communicated to the narrator, b) inferred from behavior, or c) narrator did not indicate source (*e.g., So she told me that she felt really guilty for making fun of me.*)	
Resolutions	References to event's denouement (*e.g., Then she ended up coming back and apologizing to me, so that was pretty much the send of the situation.*)	$\alpha = .75$

Table 1

Frequencies of Partner Type and Resolutions

	Harming Others			Being Harmed			
	Male	Female	*Total*	Male	Female	*Total*	*Overall Total*
Partner							
Older Family	25	44	69	15	31	46	114
Similar-Age Family	13	21	34	13	13	26	60
Peer-Level	38	39	77	46	56	102	180
Romantic Partner	9	7	16	9	11	20	36
Unidentified	1	1	2	3	1	4	6
Total	86	112	198	86	112	198	396
Resolutions							
Yes	40	63	103	38	52	90	193
No	46	49	95	48	60	108	203
Total	86	112	198	86	112	198	396

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Narrative Elements

	Harming Others		Being Harmed	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Transgressor Behavior	1.32	0.60	1.38	0.61
Transgressor Mental	0.79	0.87	0.27	0.50
Transgressor Emotion	0.80	0.84	0.13	0.35
Victim Behavior	0.80	0.79	0.59	0.72
Victim Mental	0.32	0.55	0.67	0.84
Victim Emotion	0.92	0.73	1.27	0.85

Table 3

Summary of Paired Samples T-Tests

Narrator vs. Other Person by Perspective	*t*	Cohen's *d*	*p*
Transgressor Behavior	-1.07	-.07	.286
Transgressor Mental	7.31	.52	.000*
Transgressor Emotion	10.07	.74	.000*
Victim Behavior	-2.73	-.18	.007*
Victim Mental	4.98	.34	.000*
Victim Emotion	4.65	.31	.000*
Narrator as Transgressor vs. Narrator as Victim	*t*	Cohen's *d*	*p*
Narrator Behavior	11.70	.78	.000*
Narrator Mental	1.59	.10	.113
Narrator Emotion	-5.74	-.39	.000*
Other Person as Transgressor vs. Other Person as Victim	*t*	Cohen's *d*	*p*
Other Person Behavior	7.99	.71	.000*
Other Person Mental	-.91	-.07	.362
Other Person Emotion	-14.38	-.98	.000*

Table 4

Summary of Correlations: Attachment Style and Narrative Elements

	Harming Others		Being Harmed	
	Anxiety	Avoidance	Anxiety	Avoidance
Transgressor Behavior	-.01	.11	-.08	.04
Transgressor Mental	.00	-.02	-.02	.07
Transgressor Emotion	-.01	-.10	-.08	.01
Victim Behavior	.12	-.03	-.13	.00
Victim Mental	-.11	.10	.03	.01
Victim Emotion	-.15*	.07	-.07	.07

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

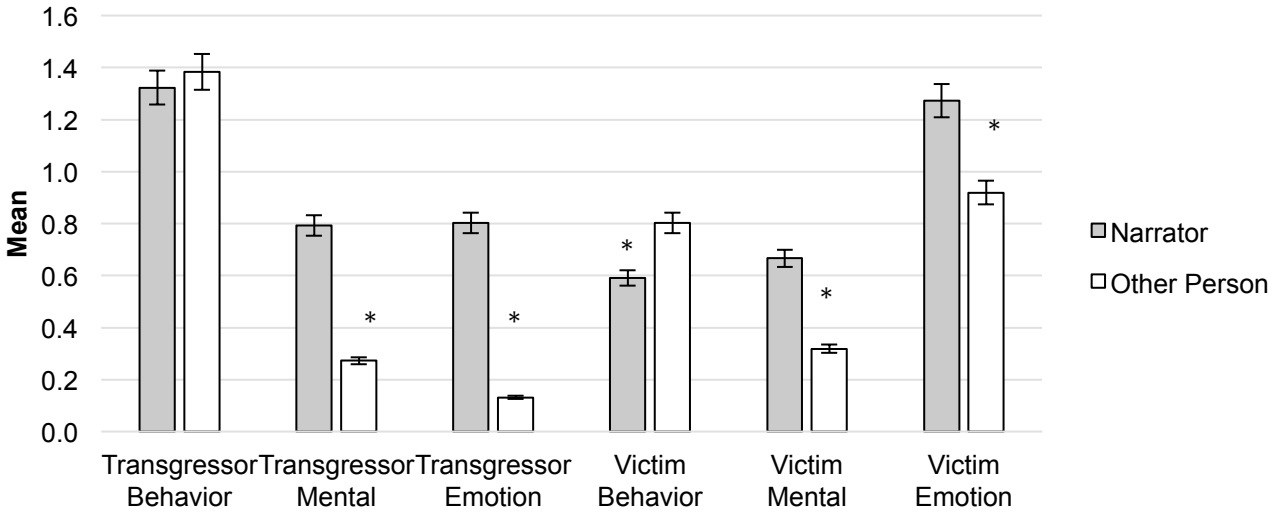

Figure 1. Mean references to behaviors, mental states, and emotions across narratives.

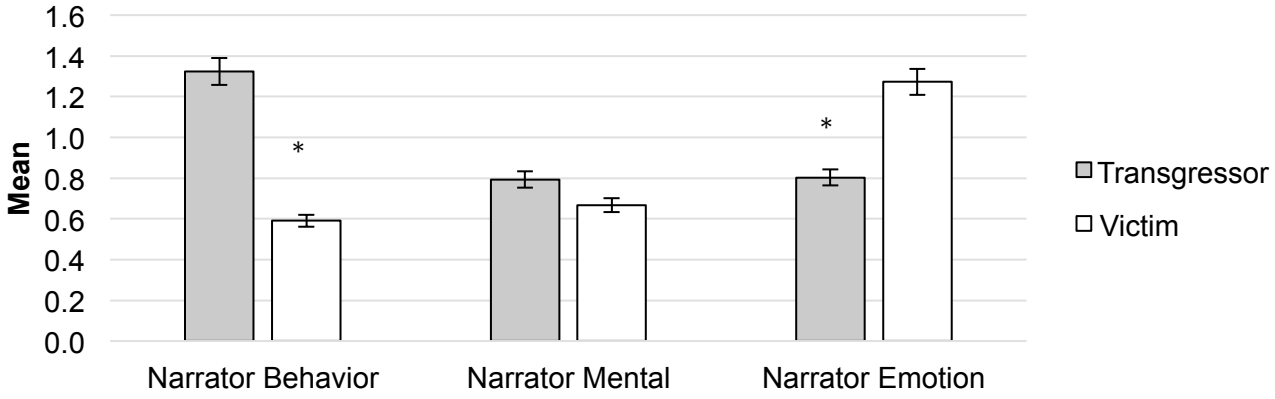

Figure 2. Mean references to own behaviors, mental states, and emotions across the roles of transgressor and victim.

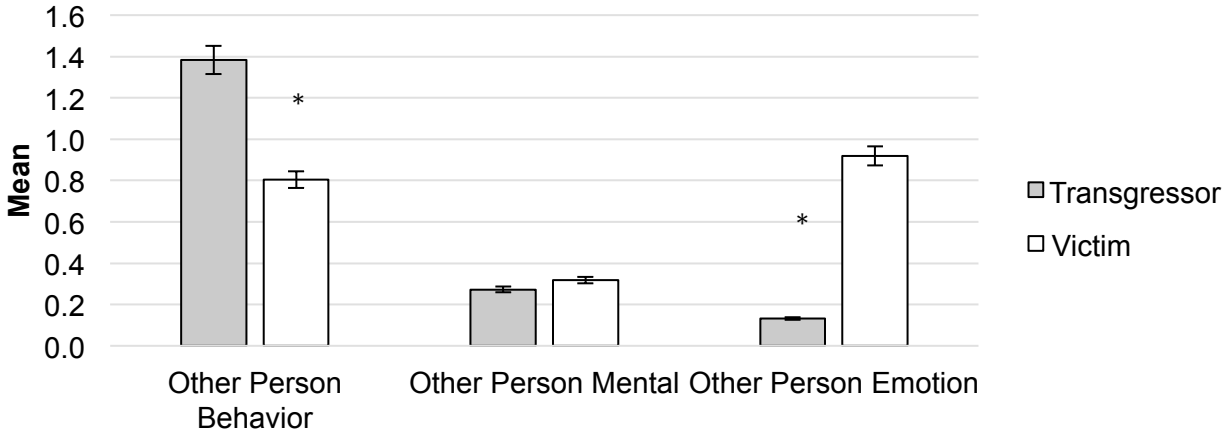

Figure 3. Mean references to other person's behaviors, mental states, and emotions across the roles of transgressor and victim.