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### Submitting to the Journal

Manuscripts are accepted on a rolling basis, and may be submitted electronically at any time. Manuscripts should conform to the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA). Manuscripts should not exceed 8,000 words including references (although exceptions may be made at the editor's discretion) and should not have been published in any prior form. The journal follows a policy of blind review; authors should avoid any identification in the body of the manuscript or abstract.

Manuscripts should be submitted electronically to the editor. See the website for his or her contact information: www.northwestcomm.org. Authors should submit:

1. A letter to the editor with the title and full names of author(s), affiliation, contact information, email, and telephone number sent in the body of an email.
2. The complete manuscript with 5–7 keywords, references, tables and figures in a word document without author information.
3. A 75–150 word abstract in a word document without author information.

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# Media Coverage of Muslims, Perceived Threats, Ethnocentrism, and Intercultural Contact: Applying Cultivation Theory, Integrated Threat Theory, and the Contact Hypothesis

ZEEBA KHAN AND JON BRUSCHKE

California State University, Fullerton

This study examined reported media exposure, perceived threats from Muslims, ethnocentrism, and intercultural contact using cultivation theory, integrated threat theory, and the contact hypothesis. Ethnocentrism was the largest single predictor of perceived threat, accounting for 42% of the variance in perceived threat. To the extent that minority cultural members are perceived as a threat, they are viewed by majority cultural members in negative ways. Perceived threat was a significant antecedent to contact, with knowledge of Muslim culture accounting for 16% of the variance in contact. This investigation concludes that the solution to cultural conflict is an increase in intercultural contact.

**KEYWORDS:** Perceived threat, intercultural contact, ethnocentrism, media, Muslims

This article examines data collected in 2007, a unique historical moment when the immediate trauma from the September 11, 2001, attacks had subsided but before subsequent events (U.S. involvement in the conflict in Iraq, the engagement in Afghanistan, the assassination of Osama Bin Laden, the so-called Arab Spring of 2011) would refine understandings of terror and its relation to Islam.

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In short, it explores how attitudes about Muslims were formed at a time when world events were still unfolding and many questions about the meaning of September 11, 2001, remained open.

U.S. reaction at the time came in the form of the Bush administration's package of rhetoric and policy it deemed the War on Terror. Although mainstream media discussions have generally focused on the effectiveness the approach has had on reducing the terror threat, an issue significant in its own right is the effect of that discourse on American Muslims. Major world events can trigger feelings about and influence perceptions of other ethnic, cultural, or racial groups (Sheridan & Gillett, 2005), and there is a high correlation between international or domestic crises in which U.S. citizens are perceived to be the victims of foreigners (and foreign aggression) and an increase in hostility toward non-Caucasian or non-Christian people in the United States (Akram, 2002). Other research has by now begun to explore the influence of the post–September 11 discourse on attitudes about Muslims (Cho et al., 2003; Elasmar, 2008; Nisbet, Ostman, & Shanahan, 2009; Pintak, 2006; Scheufele, Nisbet, & Ostman, 2005; Woods, 2007).

Three theories are especially relevant when seeking to explain the relationship between world events and domestic perceptions of minority groups. First, cultivation theory would predict that extended exposure to media images that depict Muslims in a negative light will result in negative attitudes about Muslims. Second, the specific negative image of Muslims is generally that of a threatening other, making integrated threat theory (ITT) a useful framework for explanation. Third, the contact hypothesis can explain what happens when individuals holding opinions based largely on media images come into direct personal contact with Muslims.

In particular, this project has three goals. First, it seeks simply to explore attitudes about Muslims at a unique historical moment. Most broadly, we are interested in how cultivation theory, ITT, and the contact hypothesis are able to explain attitudes about Muslims

in the wake of the September 11 disaster. Second, this project seeks to extend the theories with traditional theory-building mechanisms, in particular, the addition of variables that are relevant to the processes of the various theories but that have not, to date, been included. Third, this project seeks to integrate the different theories. All theories explain an important component of the overall attitude formation process, but bringing them to bear on this specific context (attitudes about Muslims in the post–September 11 world) requires integrating the theories. Most broadly, we begin by exploring the notion that media exposure produces a perceived threat, which in turn predicts the willingness of non-Muslim Americans to engage in direct contact with Muslims.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

### *Cultivation Theory and Media Exposure*

Many studies have examined the effects of exposure to media. Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1994) explained that cultivation theory is based on findings that television shapes viewers' perceptions of reality. A classic finding concerns the fear of crime: Individuals exposed to reports of crime perceived themselves to be at a high risk of being victimized by criminal activity (Bryant, Carveth, & Brown, 1981). Although the media is intended to inform, it might inadvertently be creating an environment of fear (Kellner, 2002; Romer, Jamieson, & Aday, 2003). Fear, in turn, can result in a stronger identification with one's in-group (i.e., increased ethnocentrism) and increased hostility and aggression toward members of the out-group (Argyrides & Downey, 2004).

The fear generated by terrorism has been linked to Muslims. Most generally, Western knowledge of Islam continues to be driven by the distorted writings of early Orientalists ("Western Media," 2005). Edward Said (1979) explained that canonical Orientalism is framed by political forces that brought the Orient into Western

consciousness and the Western empire. The Orient is seen as static, homogenous, eccentric, and backward, with a tendency toward despotism and away from progress. It is the "Other"—a mirror image to the West, representing what is inferior, conquerable, and alien (Said, 1979). Print media, radio, and television have perpetuated anti-Muslim sentiment (Shaheen, 2001). The predominant stereotypical Muslim men are terrorists and oil sheikhs, whereas the predominant stereotypical Muslim women are scantily clad, exotic belly dancers in harems or weak, mute, faceless creatures enveloped in veils (Akram, 2002). "The terms Islamic or Muslim are linked to extremism, militant, jihads, as if they belonged together inextricably and naturally (Muslim extremist, Islamic terror, Islamic war, Muslim time bomb)" ("Media," 2005, para. 4; Woods, 2007). Not surprisingly, there has been a notable increase in violence against Muslims and anti-Muslim attitudes since September 11, 2001 (Prengaman, 2006; "Western Media," 2005).

Researchers have argued that an exaggerated level of public concern about terrorism pushed government officials to support the restriction of civil liberties and that the media played a significant role in creating and sustaining these concerns (Cho et al., 2003; Nisbet et al., 2009; Scheufele et al., 2005; Sunstein, 2003, 2004). These conclusions dovetail with other research that has shown that Americans are far more supportive of restrictions that affect only disliked out-group members rather than the public at large (Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Wood, 1995). The USA PATRIOT Act, which increased law enforcement powers, reduced the flow of information and limited other civil liberties (Woods, 2007). These measures were directed mostly at out-group members, mainly men of Muslim or Arab background.

Cultivation theory is a useful rubric to explain these forces. The general public's basic knowledge and familiarity with Islam have not increased considerably since 2001 (Nisbet et al., 2009). As such, the general public is heavily dependent on media content to make

evaluations regarding Muslims, and heavy viewers of television news are more likely to agree to greater restrictions on civil liberties because of heightened fears of terrorist attacks from Muslims (Scheufele et al., 2005). There can be little doubt that media coverage of Muslims is at least as negative and threat invoking as coverage of crime. To replicate Scheufele et al.'s test of cultivation theory, a first hypothesis is offered:

> H1: Greater reported exposure to media coverage will be associated with greater degrees of perceived threat from American Muslims and Muslim immigrants.

### *Integrated Threat Theory*

Stephan and Stephan's (2000) ITT has been used to explain attitudes of both out-groups and in-groups and applied successfully in predicting the in-group's attitude toward immigrants (Littleford, Wright, & Sayoc-Parial, 2005; Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002; Stephan, Diaz-Loving, & Duran, 2000; Stephan & Stephan, 1996, 2000). ITT identifies four types of threats, realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), and describes the antecedents as well as the outcomes of in-group–out-group communication.

Realistic threats are threats presented by the out-group and include threats to the in-group's existence, political or economic power, and physical or material welfare. Symbolic threats are threats to the in-group's worldview that involve norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, and morals. Intergroup anxiety is the notion that people feel threatened during intergroup interactions. Negative stereotypes generate negative expectations, which, in turn, lead in-group members to anticipate negative consequences from intercultural encounters (Stephan & Stephan, 2000).

In a revised version of ITT, Stephan and Renfro (2002) posited that several antecedents are likely to increase perceived threat. Their

new antecedents are intergroup relations, cultural dimensions, individual differences, and situational factors. Although Stephan and Renfro call for cross-cultural studies to test the impact of cultural dimensions on perceived threats, they refer specifically to three dimensions of culture: individualistic/collectivistic, high power distance/low power distance, and high uncertainty avoidance/low uncertainty avoidance.

We seek to supplement understanding of threat antecedents in two ways. First, it is possible that media images can have an impact on the formation of people's levels of perceived threat and their ensuing attitudes and behaviors, thus making media exposure an additional antecedent. The media's repetitive use of stereotypes, in particular, can play a key role in forming people's attitudes toward out-group members. If contact between in-group and out-group members is rare, the only means by which in-group members can obtain information about the out-group is through secondhand accounts, and media images are likely to play a substantial role. This proposed function is tested with Hypothesis 1.

Second, ethnocentrism of in-group members may result in greater perceptions of threat and might be considered a specific individual difference, as suggested by Stephan and Renfro (2002). Although the concept has an extended lineage (Levinson, 1950; Sumner, 1906), a contemporary definition of ethnocentrism is offered by Neuliep and McCroskey (1997), who define ethnocentrism as a state where individuals see their cultural group as being the best one and reject other cultures as being inferior because of perceived differences or a disagreement between cultural ideologies. Although some degree of ethnocentrism is inevitable or even positive (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994), people with ethnocentric attitudes engage in cooperative and obedient behaviors with in-group members but are competitive and disobedient with out-group members, hold belittling attitudes toward them, and perform antisocial behaviors toward out-group members (Neuliep, Chaudoir, & McCroskey, 2001).

An application of ITT to American Muslims in a post–September 11 world suggests a second hypothesis:

H2: Greater degrees of ethnocentrism will be associated with a greater perceived threat from American Muslims and Muslim immigrants.

### *Intercultural Contact*

While some academicians argue that the clash of civilizations is an inevitable source of conflict and argue for separation (e.g., Huntington, 1993), the field of intercultural communication sees more and positive connections as the key to bridging gaps. The most developed academic treatment of the topic is the contact hypothesis, which posits that prejudice against members of one group by members of another will be reduced with increased social contact between members of the groups, especially if the contact is positive and individuals from different groups have the opportunity to interact on a personal level (Allport, 1954/1979). Intercultural contact research dates back to the 1950s, and a recent meta-analysis of intergroup contact theory has yielded valuable insights about the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954/1979; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000, 2006). Nearly 51% of all contact theory studies have focused on ethnic and racial groups, while the remaining studies have focused on target groups organized by sexual orientation, the elderly, the physically challenged, the mentally challenged, and mentally ill participants (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Reviews of the intergroup contact literature conclusively support the contact hypothesis, indicating that intergroup contact typically reduces intergroup prejudice. Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis of 713 independent samples and 515 studies found overall support for the contact hypothesis, concluding that "mere" contact was sufficient to produce positive outcomes and that "there is little need to demonstrate further contact's general ability to

lessen prejudice" (p. 768). Pettigrew and Tropp concluded that a more productive research direction is to explore factors that inhibit positive contact outcomes rather than factors that facilitate positive contact outcomes: "Factors that curb contact's ability to reduce prejudice are now the most problematic theoretically, yet the least understood" (p. 767). In particular, they believed perceived threat is such an inhibitor and encouraged research in this "fresh perspective" (p. 767). Pettigrew and Tropp ended with a call for models that consider "individual, structural, and normative antecedents of contact" (p. 768), such as the multilevel, multitheory framework utilized here. We propose adding ethnocentrism as a unique antecedent to ITT and connecting ITT to the contact hypothesis, which also has not studied ethnocentrism as an antecedent. Pettigrew and Tropp's meta-analysis, for example, reviewed findings on prejudice, intergroup differentiation, in-group pride, and willingness to forgive an out-group but made no mention of ethnocentrism.

Knowledge is an additional factor related to contact, and numerous studies have reported that European Americans share a general lack of knowledge about cultures other than their own (see R. L. Jackson & Crawley, 2003, and references therein). This remains true despite an overall trend toward increased diversity (Ness & Kim, 2001). Theorizing causal directions is difficult, but a lack of knowledge about other cultures, and Muslim culture in particular, might also be a predictor of low intercultural contact.

A final reason to conduct more research on the contact hypothesis is the United States's unique historical circumstance. The present study provides a timely and poignant test of the ability of simple contact to reduce negative attitudes about a group very likely to have generated anxiety in the years immediately following the 2001 attacks. A positive finding would confirm the ability of contact to reduce negative outcomes not simply in the context of general out-groups (the disabled, HIV/AIDS victims, those of other religions) but even in the context of a specific out-group aggressively portrayed

as a direct military threat. Given the sociopolitical ramifications of the War on Terror, we believe it is important to study the effects of the Bush administration's rhetoric on the Muslim population in the United States to confirm whether contact theory can be extended to this particularly high-profile target group. Given the reasons to suspect that ethnocentrism and knowledge may be associated with contact, we predict the following:

H3: Ethnocentrism will be negatively associated with intercultural contact, and knowledge will be positively associated with intercultural contact.

## METHODS AND RESULTS

### *Respondents*

A total of 252 students from a major Southern California university volunteered to participate in the study. Of the 252 respondents, there were 94 (37%) men and 158 (63%) women. The average age for this study was 20.2 years. Respondents self-reported their ethnicity, with 25% responding European American, 23% responding Asian American, 35% responding Latino American, 6% responding African American, 4% responding Middle Eastern American, and 8% responding other (Pacific Islander, Italian American, Native American, and of mixed ethnic background). Students were asked whether they had completed a general education course designed to increase appreciation for cultural diversity.

### *Initial Model Specification*

On the basis of prior research, the three theories were integrated into a single path model, as shown in Figure 1. Generally speaking, it is hypothesized that media variables will influence knowledge and attitudes and that knowledge and attitudes will subsequently predict the amount of contact with Muslims. The purpose of composing

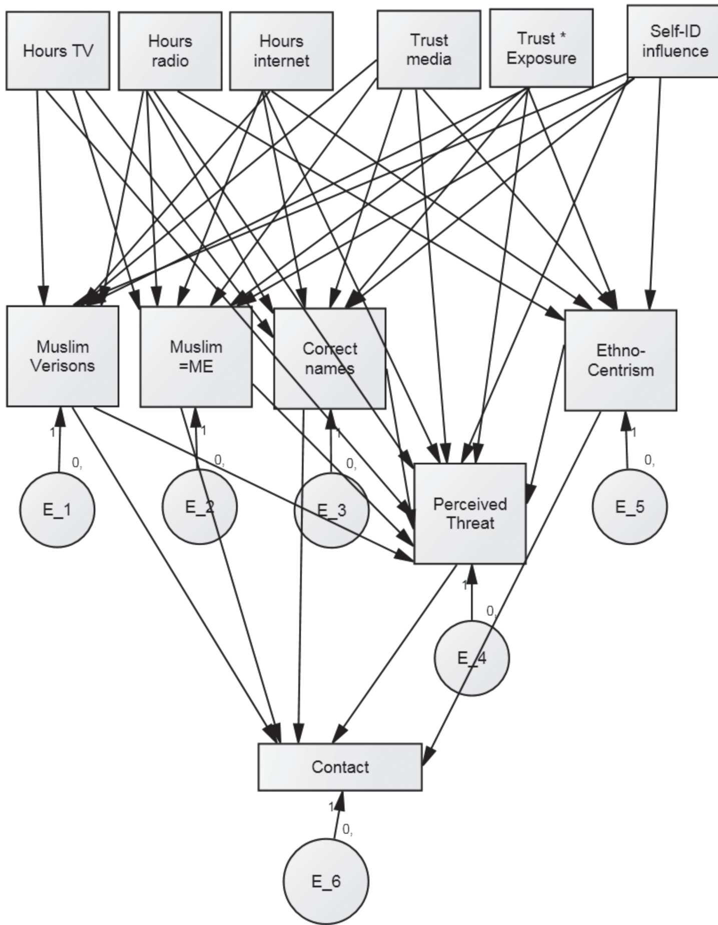


FIGURE 1. Full initial models with error weights set to 1 and all variables included.

the model this way is to study antecedents to contact with Muslims.

Media variables appear at the top of the model. The three boxes at the top left indicate gross amounts of media exposure. The three boxes at the top right indicate the degree of trust in media, self-reported media influence, and the interaction between trust in the media and total exposure. The interaction is based on the

supposition that those who trust the media the most will be influenced by exposure to the greatest extent. Boxes on the middle left include three measures of knowledge about Muslims, described later. Boxes on the middle right include two attitude measures: perceived threat from Muslims and ethnocentrism. The box at the bottom is contact with Muslims. All variables were manifest; no latent variables were explored.

### *Questionnaire and Measurement*

Although studies in cultivation theory have adopted different metrics, the core measure is one of total exposure. Other refined measures utilized in cultivation theory research include content-based measures, measures of news credibility and fear, and perceived television realism (Banjo, 2002; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). To assess gross exposure to media, three single-item measures were used. Participants self-reported the average number of hours per day they spent watching television, listening to the radio, and accessing the Internet. Three items measuring credibility were adapted from Gaziano and McGrath (1986), and three direct measures of self-perceived linkages between media and fear were included. The three media exposure items did not correlate, indicating that exposure is media specific (i.e., heavy television users are not necessarily heavy Internet users). The credibility items did not obtain acceptable reliability ($\alpha < .5$), indicating that the items were measuring separate constructs. The item that most directly measured trust in media coverage of Muslims ("The media can be trusted with its coverage of Muslims") was retained for analysis.

Measures for assessing perceived threat were adapted from Stephan and Stephan (1985, 1993), and all questions were made specific to Muslims. The seven items for the realistic threat measure focused on possible problems due to differences in values and beliefs between participants and foreign immigrants. An item from this scale is "Muslim immigration is undermining American culture."

The eight items for the symbolic threat measure focused on crime, job loss, and economic costs due to immigration. A sample item is "Social services have become less available to Americans because of Muslim immigration." Items for the intergroup anxiety measure focused on people feeling threatened during intercultural interactions with Muslims because they were worried about negative outcomes. An item from this scale is "I am concerned about another terrorist attack carried out by Muslims." Finally, the last component of ITT was negative stereotyping, and a measure of this construct focused on negative expectations of Muslims. An example of this scale is "Most Muslims are extremists." The 20 items were combined into a single measure of perceived threat and were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5, with a larger value indicating greater perceived threat. Of the 20 questions, 4 questions proved to be unreliable and were eliminated. The subsequent reliability for the perceived threat measure was a Cronbach's alpha of .79.

A crucial antecedent for ITT is ignorance of the out-group. Knowledge about Muslims was measured in three ways. First, respondents were queried whether being Muslim was synonymous with being from the Middle East, a common stereotype. An affirmative answer indicated ignorance about Muslims. Second, respondents were presented with a list of 10 paired names. Each name pair was similar, but only one of the names was Muslim; the number of correctly identified Muslim names was summed, with higher scores indicating greater knowledge about Muslims. Third, one of the discarded threat perception items queried whether there were multiple versions of Islam; higher scores indicated a greater knowledge about Muslims. Together, these three items served as measures of knowledge about Muslims.

To assess intercultural contact with Muslims, the participants responded to four items adapted from Biernat and Crandall (1996). The questions were as follows: (a) "How often do you talk to and engage in informal conversations with Muslims?" (b) "How often

do you study or do other class work with Muslims?” (c) “How often do you talk to and engage with Muslims at work?” and (d) “How often do you do things socially with Muslims (this includes things like sharing meals, going to movies and parties, etc.)?” The items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*all the time*). In addition, respondents were asked to indicate the number of Muslim friends they had. As a validation check, respondents were asked to list the names of their Muslim friends and, on a 1–4 scale, rate the amount of time they spent together. The reported number of Muslim friends, the average time spent with Muslim friends, and the greatest amount of time spent with any individual Muslim friend were combined with the four Biernat and Crandall items. The scale obtained a Cronbach’s alpha score of .85. All items were normalized with $z$-transformations and combined into a single index.

The ethnocentrism measure was adapted from Neuliep and McCroskey’s (1997) Generalized Ethnocentrism Scale. It consisted of 15 items and was adapted to assess evaluations of Muslims specifically. An sample item is as follows: “Muslim culture would be smart to look up to our culture.” The items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scale’s reliability was high ($\alpha = .87$), and higher scores corresponded to greater ethnocentrism.

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Six variables were included in the final analysis: reported television exposure ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 1.28$), reported radio exposure ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 2.25$), reported Internet exposure ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.93$), perceived threat ($M = 2.72$, $SD = .47$), intercultural contact ($M = 8.03$, $SD = 3.58$), and ethnocentrism ($M = 2.18$, $SD = .57$). There was no significant difference on either ethnocentrism or perceived threat between those students who had completed the general education cultural diversity course and those who had not.

### *Model Testing and Development*

Because very few comprehensive models will obtain good measures of data fit (Holbert & Stephenson, 2002, reported that 80% of published communication models do not obtain results indicating adequate data fit), a common approach is to test and then refine the model. This process, utilized here, is best described as an exploratory model construction.

Unsurprisingly, the model in Figure 1 did not obtain acceptable measures of data fit. All regression weights for endogenous variable error terms were set to 1, giving a standard regression output (Arbuckle, 2009). The minimum chi-square test (CMIN) was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 678.7$, $p < .001$, and the root mean square error adjusted (RMSEA) score was .30, above the accepted .05 criterion (Hu & Bentler, 1999, noted that the RMSEA criterion score is not a level of statistical significance). The model was subsequently modified in three steps. First, all nonsignificant paths were eliminated. Second, the model was run again, and two of the remaining paths did not obtain significance in the new model. Those paths were subsequently eliminated. Third, a path between self-reported media influence and the belief that all Muslims were from the Middle East, while significant, was weak and was eliminated because it did not connect via any pathway to the ultimate dependent variable (contact).

The final model is displayed in Figure 2. All pathways in Figure 2 are statistically significant; numbers adjacent to pathway lines are beta weights, whereas figures to the top right of individual parameter boxes are $r^2$ scores. The final model did obtain adequate measures for goodness of fit. The CMIN chi-square was not significant, $\chi^2(14) = 22.2$, $p = .07$. The RMSEA score was .048, a marginal but acceptable figure. The model explained 20% of the variance in ethnocentrism, 42% of the variance in perceived threat, and 16% of the variance in contact.

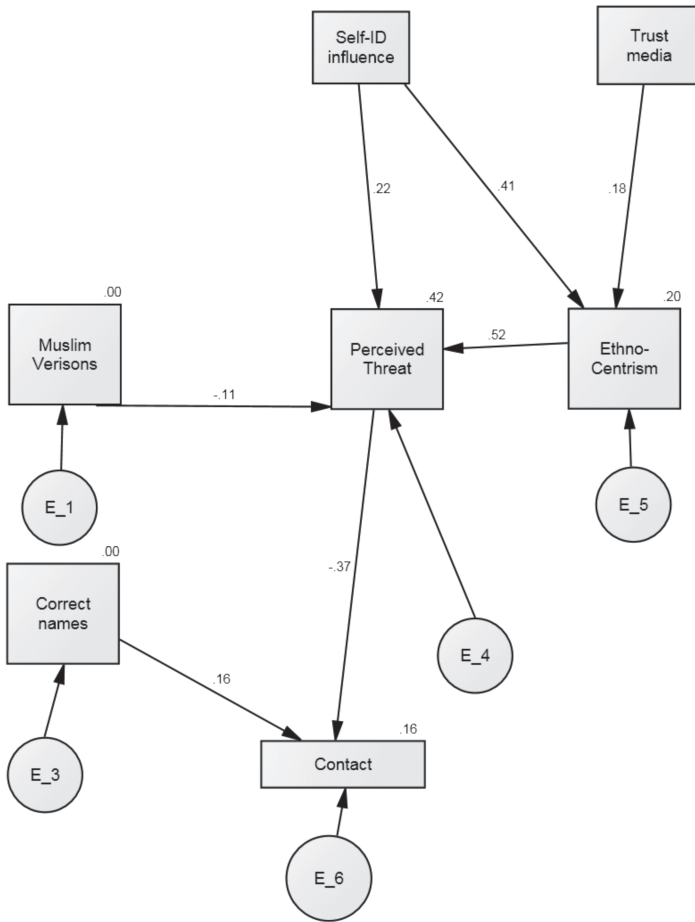


FIGURE 2. Final model with beta weights along pathways and $r^2$ scores for endogenous parameters.

## DISCUSSION

While Stephan and Stephan's (2000) ITT is most prevalently used to study prejudice and attitudes (Stephan et al., 2002; Stephan et al., 2000), this study combined ITT with cultivation theory to

explore the means by which individuals become aware of potential threats. Furthermore, this investigation also explored threat as an antecedent to contact, a key area of exploration identified by Stephan and Renfro (2002).

### *Cultivation Theory (Hypothesis 1)*

Total amount of media exposure did not correlate with any attitude in this study, nor was total exposure more likely to influence people who indicated a trust in the media. However, self-reported media influence (as indicated by agreement with the statement "After I watch the news/read news articles, I feel scared of Middle Easterners") was related to both perceived threat and ethnocentrism, while trust in the media did predict ethnocentrism. Thus greater reported exposure to media coverage (via television, radio, and/or the Internet), by itself, was not associated with greater degrees of perceived threat. Possible explanations for these findings include (a) social desirability bias, (b) media saturation, (c) unreliability of measurement, and (d) the relative importance of content rather than sheer exposure.

A potential limitation of this study is that a social desirability bias may have been present. It is possible that the participants of this investigation may have falsely reported their levels of media exposure, perceived threat, or ethnocentrism because they were trying to preserve their self-esteem or portray themselves in a favorable light to the researcher (Phillips & Clancy, 1972). However, if a social desirability effect was present, it contaminated only the relationships involving self-reports of media exposure, because intercultural contact proved to be systematically related to perceived threat and ethnocentrism. Although we suspect that some level of social desirability may have caused respondents to underreport levels of ethnocentrism and perceived threat, we do not believe that such an effect can explain the nonsignificance of Hypothesis 1. Also arguing against a social desirability effect was the lack of a

significant difference for either ethnocentrism or perceived threat between students who had and had not completed a course designed to enhance appreciation for cultural diversity. Normal guarantees of anonymity were offered on the questionnaire, further mitigating any social desirability bias.

A second possibility is that media saturation of the War on Terror was so complete that relative levels of media exposure are irrelevant. Simply put, it may be the case that coverage of Muslims was so ubiquitous and so negative that virtually everyone in the sample had received a level of exposure sufficient to shape attitudes about Muslims. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, virtually all media were entirely consumed by the events. People watched more television and read more newspapers in the aftermath of the attacks (Cho et al., 2003; Scheufele et al., 2005). Increases in the use of all media might have made exposure patterns less distinguishable (Cho et al., 2003). Such a unique moment in media history could simply have created a situation of exposure so massive that cultivation theory did not anticipate it. It is quite possible that, regardless of the level of media exposure one experiences now, more than a decade after the attack, the level of exposure immediately after the attack was sufficient to affect most people in the sample. The significant pathway between trust in the media and ethnocentrism supports this interpretation; a correlation between the variables only seems possible if the overall media message propagates ethnocentric values (in this instance, the belief that Muslim culture is inferior to Western culture).

A third possible reason for the nonsignificance of Hypothesis 1 is a lack of reliability of the media exposure measures. The more sophisticated measures of media credibility utilized elsewhere did not produce reliable item clusters in the present experiment. The result was reliance on single-item measures of total exposure, which has inherent limitations (S. Jackson, 1992). This relatively poor measurement of the media exposure variable might be responsible

for the variable's failure to covary with dependent measures.

A fourth explanation concerns media content. This investigation did not study media content. Perceived threat might depend on the type of media exposure, specifically news media versus other genres. For example, *Meet the Press* may have profoundly different content than the fictional Jack Bauer's *24*, and the pages of the *New York Times* may contain fundamentally different content than *The Rush Limbaugh Show*. Cultivation theory starts with the premise that content is so homogenous that the content itself is not as important as the volume of exposure. Future research may seek to explore the content of media as well as the volume of exposure.

A final possibility, of course, is that cultivation theory has simply been disconfirmed.

It is important to note that although raw media exposure did not emerge as a key model term, self-reported media influence did appear to play an important role, contributing both to perceived threat and ethnocentrism. Although both perceived threat and ethnocentrism were predicted through two paths, in each instance, self-reported media influence explained twice the variance as the other variable; that is, self-reported media influence explained roughly twice the variance of perceived threat than a belief in multiple versions of Islam did (the knowledge variable), and it explained roughly twice the variance in ethnocentrism that trust in the media did. The implication for cultivation theory is that media consumers are self-aware of the meanings they take from messages; in this study, the ability to indicate that "after I watch the news/read news articles, I feel scared of Middle Easterners" was significantly related to attitudes, whereas raw exposure measures were not. Evidently, self-awareness of the media interpretations seems to be important, at least in this context.

This finding contributes to the well-known discussion of the tension between cultivation theory's view of audience members as fairly passive and uses and gratification theory's view of audience

members as fairly active. At a minimum, the results obtained here suggest that it would be productive for cultivation theory to acknowledge a more conscious role of audience members. Results in the present study emerged only for those respondents who were self-aware that their exposure to news media was producing feelings of fear. We believe that this exploratory effort suggests this interesting pattern for future research: Specific media messages (in this instance, the Bush administration's War on Terror) may so saturate a culture that relative levels of exposure are unimportant to attitude formation; however, individuals who can consciously identify that media messages make them afraid are more likely to develop negative attitudes.

### *Integrated Threat Theory (Hypothesis 2)*

As predicted, ethnocentrism was a significant predictor of perceived threat, although it did not directly serve as a disinhibitor for contact. Knowledge of other cultures did seem to play a role but was not an especially strong antecedent for perceived threat or contact. Belief in multiple versions of Islam did negatively correlate with perceived threat, but ethnocentrism explained 5 times more variance. Neither of the other two measures of knowledge correlated with perceived threat, although the ability to correctly identify Muslim names did correlate with contact (discussed in the next section).

This finding is an important contribution to ITT. As currently articulated, ITT supposes that some specific relationship between the in-group and out-group is necessary. For example, the in-group and out-group must have a certain status relation, or prior negative contact, or the in-group must be ignorant of the out-group. Our findings here suggest that, additionally, in-group ethnocentrism plays a role in threat perception, independent of any characteristic of the out-group or knowledge about them. The media findings do further suggest that information obtained from the media, at least for self-aware media consumers, does play a role in generating

perceptions of threat. This role does appear to be independent of actual knowledge about the out-group. In sum, ethnocentrism and awareness of media messages do appear to be important, and previously unexplored, antecedents to perceptions of threat.

### *Contact (Hypothesis 3)*

We discovered two direct predictors of contact: the ability to correctly identify Muslim names (which was positively associated with contact) and perceived threat (which was negatively associated with contact). The inhibiting affect of perceived threat was roughly twice as large as the disinhibiting influence of correct name identification.

The influence of correct name recognition responds to Stephan and Renfro's (2002) call for greater study of contact hypothesis antecedents by borrowing concepts from ITT. ITT suggests that one antecedent to threat perception is knowledge, and to the extent that correct name recognition is a measure of knowledge, it also appears that knowledge is an antecedent to contact. Interestingly, correct name recognition did not correlate with threat perception, and thus the relationship appears not to confirm ITT but does suggest a precursor for the contact hypothesis. Similarly, perceived threat, a concept central to ITT, does appear to function as a crucial antecedent to contact.

An inherent limitation of the correlation approach, not remedied by path modeling, is establishing causality. It may simply be that people who have contact with Muslims have greater knowledge about Muslim culture and fear them less, and such an interpretation is entirely consistent with the data presented here. Regardless of direction, this investigation supports the extensive amount of work that has reported a negative relationship between intercultural contact, perceived threat, and ethnocentrism (Allport, 1954/1979; Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Hewstone, 2003; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000; Stephan et al., 2002; Stephan et al., 2000; Voci & Hewstone, 2003; Ward & Masgoret, 2006).

We feel that it is significant to discover that the contact hypothesis does appear to hold in the context of American Muslims and Muslim immigrants to the United States even in the wake of the September 11 event and the subsequent barrage of negative media coverage of Muslims. Allport's (1954/1979) conditions of equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and authority sanction have informed the literature on intergroup relations. Pettigrew (1998) added friendship potential as a fifth condition for positive intergroup contact. Intercultural interactions with high friendship potential allow participants to develop a greater intellectual and relational capacity because of their meaningful, reciprocal exchange (Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003). Studies have shown the importance of intergroup friendship in promoting positive changes in intergroup attitudes (Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003; Pettigrew, 1997; Wright, Aron, & Tropp, 2002; Wright, Brody, & Aron, 2005; Wright & Tropp, 2005). This study extends and highlights the importance of friendship with culturally different others and the significant role that intercultural contact plays in reducing the effects of perceived threat on ethnocentrism. It is a sharp rejection of approaches, such as those offered by Huntington (1993), that recommend a decrease in personal contact as a means to safety.

## LIMITATIONS

Although consistent with and derived from prior research, the media use measures adopted here do seem problematic. Measures of raw media consumption were single-item measures; measures of media credibility that were reliable in prior research did not form scales here and forced the use of single-item measures of media credibility as well. Although we do not wish to minimize the limitations of single-item measures (S. Jackson, 1992), the performance of the self-awareness of media influence measure item does suggest some substantive relationship at play. Nonetheless, future

research should seek more refined measures of media consumption and media consumer awareness. The methods here also relied on respondent self-reporting and discussed total media usage; future research might explore distinctions between news and entertainment media or query attention to messages particular to national security or depictions of Muslims.

Reliability limitations do seem limited to the media measures; contact, ethnocentrism, and perceived threat scales all emerged with acceptable reliability scores.

Although this study did explore potential additional antecedents to ITT, any comparison to Stephan and Stephan's (1990) four extant factors was not possible; only knowledge was explored in any way. Future research should include the additional three factors as well. It should be noted that the knowledge measures used here did not correlate with one another. It is unclear whether the measures therefore indicate separate dimensions of knowledge or different rigor in the respondent task (correctly identifying names as Muslim versus providing Likert-style answers) or whether they are simply not reliable. Future research should seek to measure cultural knowledge in more exacting terms.

Finally, the use of correlation data makes any causal claim difficult to sustain (although it would not be surprising to discover some mutually reinforcing influence in force). Untangling the direction of perceived threat, knowledge, and contact relationships is important work for future research.

## CONCLUSIONS

The hope at the outset of this study was that combining the three theories in a complementary way would provide a more complete account of one of the more urgent practical situations U.S. society faces and might also offer the opportunity for a reflective reformulation of theory. We hoped to combine cultivation theory with ITT

to enrich understandings of antecedents to intercultural contact. The various parameters from these theories were incorporated into an exploratory path model.

The result was partially successful. The cultivation theory expectation that media exposure would result in perceived threat did not materialize, perhaps due to poor measurement, but more provocatively perhaps due to media saturation. However, respondents who reported a greater degree of self-aware media influence were more likely to be both ethnocentric and more likely to perceive a threat from Muslims. This suggests a direction for cultivation theory that increasingly incorporates the influence of audience engagement into its explanations. Furthermore, cultivation theory would seem to benefit from an accounting of situations of extreme media saturation.

The predicted relationship between perceived threat and ethnocentrism was confirmed, extending ITT in an important applied context. To the extent that minority cultural members are perceived as a threat, it may be expected that they will be viewed by majority cultural members in negative ways. In addition, characteristics of the in-group, such as ethnocentrism, may play an active role in the degree to which out-groups are perceived as threats. This contribution is both theoretically important and practically meaningful; ethnocentrism was the largest single predictor of perceived threat in a model that explained 42% of the variance in perceived threat. It does appear that ethnocentrism is a concept that should be incorporated into ITT.

Perceived threat was a significant antecedent to contact with Muslims. Unexpectedly, knowledge of out-group culture emerged as a direct predictor of contact, even though it did not correlate with perceived threat, as expected. Together, these two factors accounted for 16% of the variance in contact. On one hand, the relationships uncovered here do make a contribution to understanding the forces that encourage and discourage contact between in-groups

and out-groups. On the other hand, there is clearly much more that can be understood about the antecedents of in-group contact and much ground for future research to cover. The exploratory model offered here can serve as a useful starting point for more extensive and confirmatory research.

Although questions of causality remain elusive, this investigation concludes that the solution to cultural conflict is an increase, and not a decrease, in intercultural contact. The study of ways to improve intercultural contact seems more urgent than ever in our current political context.

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# With a Little Help From My Wife: An Examination of Anthony Weiner's Image Repair Discourse Through Third-Party Defense and a Postcrisis Discourse of Renewal

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This analysis examines the image repair strategies of former New York congressman Anthony Weiner in the immediate aftermath of his Twitter scandal and during his New York City mayoral comeback attempt. Because of the changing nature of the allegations over a 2-year period, this study adopts a phasic approach and examines how Weiner's discourse changed from the scandal to his attempted comeback. Although his initial discourse was ineffective, this article argues Weiner's political comeback discourse was effective. Borrowing from organizational communication, Weiner's discourse can be viewed as an instance of postcrisis discourse of renewal, whereby he mitigated the damage from his Twitter scandal while forging a positive image for the future. Particularly effective during the comeback attempt was the third-party defense by his wife, Huma Abedin, who had given Weiner a second chance, which bolstered Weiner's candidacy. Abedin's defense made his political comeback bid viable until the Carlos Danger sexting scandal effectively ended his candidacy. Implications are drawn concerning how political candidates can adopt a postcrisis discourse of renewal when attempting to return to public office after a scandal and how third-party defenses can bolster a political comeback.

**KEYWORDS:** Anthony Weiner, image repair, sex scandals, discourse of renewal, third-party defense

The United States has a long history of male politicians becoming mired in scandal owing to sexual impropriety. One of the earliest sex scandals occurred in 1791, when then secretary of the treasury

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Alexander Hamilton had an affair with Maria Reynolds, whose husband uncovered the affair and blackmailed Hamilton for years to keep the affair secret (Zernike, 2011). Contemporary examples of political sex scandals include Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky (Blaney & Benoit, 2001), Ted Kennedy's involvement with Mary Jo Kopechne before the Chappaquiddick incident (Benoit, 1988), and Gary Condit's relationship with Chandra Levy until her disappearance (Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004). Each of these scandals involved accusations of marital infidelity of a physical nature, but the 21st-century media environment has introduced sexual misconduct of a digital nature. Undoubtedly one of the most high-profile cases of digital sexual impropriety was Anthony Weiner's Twitter scandal, which involved him accidentally tweeting a lewd photo of himself to the public that he was trying to send privately to a woman. Weiner's scandal presented semantical questions about whether sending a lewd photo constituted cheating if no physical contact occurred or if this lascivious conduct was enough to require one to resign from political office. Ultimately, an ill-conceived attempted cover-up by Weiner resulted in his resignation from Congress in 2011, but he reemerged 18 months later, running for New York City mayor with full support from his wife, Huma Abedin. This article views Anthony Weiner's political comeback as an instance of postcrisis discourse of renewal, whereby he sought to concurrently alleviate concerns over his past while gaining support for his mayoral candidacy.

Weiner's defense discourse deserves scholarly attention for various reasons. First, he represents one of the first politicians to be mired in a nationally publicized sex scandal through social media. Benoit (1997) noted that the severity of the transgression can impact whether an audience will forgive a rhetor of his or her wrongdoing. Certainly engaging in lewd behavior with another over social media is immoral, but how close in severity is the act to physical cheating, like President Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky? Second,

Weiner's discourse is important to examine because his wife, Huma Abedin, supported him before and during his comeback attempt. Her third-party defense represented an important aspect of Weiner's image repair effort and presents potential implications for future politicians accused of marital infidelity. Third, Weiner's attempted 2013 comeback represents an exercise in postcrisis discourse of renewal, which has been examined at length in organizational literature (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002) but remains understudied in political discourse. As such, this analysis examines Anthony Weiner's defense discourse in two separate phases. The first phase focuses on the initial Twitter photo scandal that eventually forced Weiner to resign from Congress. The second phase focuses on the *New York Times Magazine* (Van Meter, 2013) exposé that served as a litmus test to determine if a Weiner political comeback was possible. Not included in this analysis are Weiner's image repair efforts after the Carlos Danger sexting scandal emerged because his political career was effectively over at that time (Wilhelm, 2013). No defense discourse could repair Weiner's reputation at that point, which is why it was excluded from this analysis.

## SEX SCANDALS, POSTCRISIS DISCOURSE, AND THIRD-PARTY RESPONSE

Several articles have evaluated the defense discourse of politicians accused of sexual impropriety. These studies include defense efforts by Senator Ted Kennedy (Benoit, 1988), President Bill Clinton (Blaney & Benoit, 2001), Representative Gary Condit (Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004), and Detroit mayor Kwame Kilpatrick (Griffin Padgett, 2014). Implications from these studies revealed that all denied an inappropriate relationship, but with varying success. These cases have illustrated that a more nuanced approach to image repair (using strategies of minimization, attack accuser, transcendence, and mortification) after facing accusations of an inappropriate relationship

can result in a successful return to politics, as Kennedy and Clinton experienced. In contrast, Condit's and Kilpatrick's defense discourses illustrate that some apologetic discourse (particularly approaches relying on differentiation or solely on denial) is often ineffective because it lacks plausibility given the accusations. This perceived plausibility is also based on the sincerity of the rhetor and the perceived likeability of the politician. As a result, well-known and well-liked politicians like Kennedy and Clinton had a greater chance at repairing their images than the relatively unknown Condit and Kilpatrick. Additionally, in all four case studies, the longer the scandal went without resolution, the greater the damage to the politician's public support became. These case studies reveal that each sex scandal produced different exigencies based on the severity of the transgression and the perception of the politician prior to accusations of impropriety.

More recent examinations of sex scandals have moved beyond the single case study approach to compare various cases to gain a better understanding how contextual factors might influence image repair efforts. Garcia (2011) compared Bill Clinton's defense discourse with Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi's and found that they used substantively different approaches, yet both image repair efforts were appropriate for their cultural contexts. Grover and Hasel (2015) created a hierarchy to evaluate a politician's sex scandal defense based on deviation of accepted norms (bottom of model), leadership values, political power, and level of atonement (top of model). They concluded that failures at lower levels of the model can have an effect on higher levels, "for example, if deviation from norms is too large (first level), then the other three factors are irrelevant" (p. 183). The authors found that accomplishing all four levels of the hierarchical model allowed the politician to stay in office (David Vitter and Bill Clinton), whereas other politicians (Bob Livingston, Eliot Spitzer, and Anthony Weiner) deviated too far from accepted norms to remain in office. Particularly in Weiner's

case, they argued that he "masqueraded as a single man when he was in fact married," which was beyond "the normal boundaries of acceptable behavior" (p. 183). The current article finds this claim wanting, as clearly Clinton's physical affair with Monica Lewinsky in the Oval Office is assuredly a greater deviation from accepted norms than illicit online conversations. This analysis argues that Weiner's initial discourse following the Twitter scandal was the more likely reason he had to resign from Congress.

In addition to evaluating Weiner's initial discourse, this article examines Weiner's political comeback discourse as an exercise in postcrisis discourse. The majority of political image repair case studies (Benoit, 1988; Blaney & Benoit, 2001; Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004; Griffin Padgett, 2014) have evaluated the immediate crisis but have not explored comeback attempts. The lack of scholarly attention to political comebacks after a sex scandal is a result of how few comeback attempts are made. Borrowing from organizational crisis communication, Seeger and Ulmer (2002) argued that a postcrisis discourse of renewal "may help to visualize a post-crisis future, liberate resources, and energize efforts to rebuild and emphasize the potentially positive aspects of a crisis" (p. 127). Adapting a postcrisis discourse of renewal for the political comeback arena appears prudent when examining the future goals of a political actor. Scholars have applied a postcrisis discourse of renewal to organizations ranging from the textile firm Malden Mills and the lumber company Milt Cole after their organizations were damaged by devastating fires (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002) to the bond-trading firm Cantor Fitzgerald's discourse following the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Seeger, Ulmer, Novak, & Sellnow, 2005) and British Petroleum's discourse following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill (Nelson & Reierson, 2012). While organizational crisis communication scholarship has examined postcrisis renewal, Ulmer, Seeger, and Sellnow (2007) argued that most postcrisis discourse outside of the organizational context has examined image restoration

efforts of an actor and excluded examining attempts of renewal. As such, this article aims to expand political crisis communication to examine both Anthony Weiner's image repair efforts after his sex scandal and his discourse of renewal during his political comeback. Specifically, this article argues that Anthony Weiner's political comeback attempt exemplifies a discourse of renewal by seeking to visualize for voters a viable candidate for New York City mayor, gain political donations, and argue that his scandal humbled him while strengthening his devotion for his wife.

In addition to a postcrisis discourse of renewal, this article examines how third-party discourse can influence image repair efforts. Griffin Padgett (2014) argued that 21st-century technological advances moved traditionally dyadic exchanges between two parties to a more public debate with a variety of voices. Hearit (2006) argued that third-party groups can play three different roles in a crisis situation: Third parties can play the role of victim, serve as "professional critics" as a form of punditry, and represent a part of the defense. Often third-party groups will defend the accused, and these individuals offer "third-party credibility to buttress the position of the apologist, be it in the form of a news conference or writing an op-ed piece in the wrongdoer's defense" (Hearit, 2006, p. 84). Wen, Yu, and Benoit (2009) added that third parties can often employ strategies that would be inappropriate for the accused to employ, which can serve to bolster the accused's overall defense. Particularly during sex scandals, wives of the men accused have served the role of third-party defense in some circumstances. Carlita Kilpatrick (Griffin Padgett, 2014) and Wendy Vitter (Grover & Hasel, 2015) offered defenses for their husbands in similar ways. Both women argued that their "marriages were not perfect" and reaffirmed their love for their husbands. Moreover, Grover and Hasel (2015) argued that any steps toward atonement by a politician "should be coupled with third-party support by the stakeholder who is most affected, such as the wife" (p. 191).

This article seeks to further understand the role of third-party defense by examining Huma Abedin's discourse in defense of her husband, Anthony Weiner.

## METHOD

This study heeds Ulmer et al.'s (2007) call for scholarship to examine an actor's image repair strategies and discourse of renewal in the aftermath of a scandal. As such, this article examines Anthony Weiner's postcrisis discourse in four ways. First, this study utilizes Benoit's (1995) image repair theory to examine the defense discourse of Anthony Weiner in the immediate aftermath of his sex scandal (Phase I) and during his short-lived political comeback (Phase II). Benoit synthesized previous literature on image restoration and created a typology for examining image restoration strategies consisting of 5 major strategies and 12 substrategies. The strategies are denial (simple denial, shifting the blame), evasion of responsibility (provocation, defeasibility, accident, good intentions), reducing offensiveness of the event (bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, compensation), corrective action, and mortification. Second, in addition to examining his image repair strategies, this article examines Weiner's Phase II postcrisis discourse of renewal strategies. Seeger and Ulmer (2002) argued that postcrisis discourse of renewal focuses on visualizing a successful future for stakeholders, commits to rebuild, and views crisis as an opportunity for renewal. Third, this study also examines how third-party defense discourse may have bolstered or hindered Weiner's postcrisis discourse during Phase II (Hearit, 2006). Fourth, after analyzing Weiner's image repair strategies, renewal strategies, and third-party discourse, polling data are used to assess the relative effectiveness of his postcrisis discourse (Blaney & Benoit, 2001).

### *Phase I: Weiner's Initial Discourse*

On May 27, 2011, conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart first publicized the now infamous picture on Weiner's account that showed a man with a bulging crotch in his underwear (CNN Staff, 2013). The story of Weiner's Twitter account was slow building, as Twitter accounts are hacked often and his initial denial of the story appeared plausible. Yet, as the title of *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson's (2011) editorial attests, "Turning a Brief Problem Into a Big Deal," the more information that became known about the Weiner case, the greater the damage was to his image. Weiner had two stages of image repair strategies during the first phase of his defense discourse: First, he relied on denial, blame shifting, and, to a lesser degree, defeasibility and minimization. Once more information rendered his initial discourse ineffective, he relied on bolstering, mortification, and corrective action during his resignation speech.

*Stage 1: Denial, defeasibility, and minimization.* After the Breitbart story broke, Anthony Weiner primarily relied on the image repair strategy of denial. Weiner explained that his Twitter account was hacked beginning on May 30, 2011, which served as his central denial strategy during the first stage. His spokesman, Dave Arnold (as quoted in Olivera, 2011), characterized the Twitter hacking as politically motivated:

> This is intended to be a distraction, and we're not going to let it become one. Anthony's accounts were obviously hacked. He doesn't know the person named by the hacker, and we will be consulting on what steps to take next. (p. C02)

By depicting his Twitter account as being "obviously hacked," Weiner and his camp initially sought to fully deny any culpability for the lewd photo. Weiner oddly took to his Twitter account to supplement his denial by minimizing the severity of the situation

through an attempted witty barb that technology has a vendetta against him: "Tivo shot. FB hacked. Is my blender gonna attack me next? #TheToasterIsVeryLoyal" (Olivera, 2011, p. C02).

Weiner also enhanced his denial by employing a third-party defense from Gennette Nicole Cordova, the woman with whom Weiner had elicit conversations and who was supposed to be the private recipient of the infamous Weiner photo. Cordova (as quoted in Olivera, 2011) released this statement:

> The account that these tweets were sent from was familiar to me; this person had harassed me many times after the Congressman followed me on Twitter a month or so ago. Since I had dealt with this person and his cohorts before I assumed that the tweet and the picture were their latest attempts at defaming the Congressman and harassing his supporters. (p. C02)

Enlisting the denial of Cordova might have been an effective third-party defense, but in the coming week, it would represent part of the contrived deceit of Weiner, further damaging his reputation.

By June 2, 2011, the story had gained mainstream notoriety, particularly his interview with MSNBC's Luke Russert, in which Weiner relied on defeasibility (TPM, 2011). Defeasibility occurs when the accused states that there is a lack of knowledge or ability to perform the accused act. Weiner's defense asserted that he lacked the information to make a direct assertion as to what had happened with regard to the photo. Russert asked, "That's not a picture of you?" Weiner quipped, "You know I can't say with certitude. My system was hacked. Pictures can be manipulated. Pictures can be dropped in and inserted." Russert, unsatisfied with Weiner's answer, redirected, "But Congressman, you would remember if you were to take a photograph of yourself life that." Weiner responded, "One of the reasons we've asked an Internet security firm to come in, is to see if maybe something was manipulated, maybe something was

dropped in, we don't know for sure what happened here." Weiner's use of defeasibility was the most unwise aspect of his Stage 1 discourse. The phrase "I can't say with certitude" became a headline and moniker for discussing Weiner's photo and only brought more attention and questions about Weiner's credibility.

Furthermore, Weiner used minimization to downplay the severity of the accusation: "Let's kinda keep in mind why this is so silly. You know, someone committed a prank on me. Somehow got access to my Twitter account and . . . put up a picture that made fun of the name 'Weiner.' That's what happened here." The focus on "silly" and "prank" illustrates that Weiner sought to downplay the scandal in hope that the story would move out of the news cycle.

*Stage 2: Bolstering, mortification, and corrective action.* On June 6, 2011, amid constant pressure from other Democratic lawmakers, Weiner completely reversed his defense discourse from denial to mortification, where the actor takes responsibility for the act and asks the audience for forgiveness. Weiner's abrupt reversal illustrates that his initial defense discourse was ill conceived. Weiner, no longer presenting the composed politician, as he had during the first stage, was emotional and tearful while admitting that he had sent the lewd photo (Horowitz, 2011). Weiner (as quoted in Horowitz, 2011) was direct: "The picture was of me, and I sent it." He further explained that "I am deeply ashamed" and that sending the photo was "a very dumb thing to do," which was "a hugely regrettable mistake" (p. A14). Yet, the stark reversal included Weiner differentiating his actions as not violating any House rules, as he refused to resign from his congressional seat. During this June 6, 2011, apology, he made his intentions abundantly clear: "I am not resigning." Weiner differentiated his action from those that would require his dismissal from Congress: "I don't see anything I did that violated any rules of the House. I don't see anything that violated my oath of office to uphold the Constitution" (p. A14). Weiner's actions demonstrated that he adored public office and,

even in admittance of his transgressions, could not resign from the office he so desperately wanted to keep. By differentiating his Twitter photos from acts that violated House rules, he sought to keep his seat.

Unfortunately for Weiner, after fervently denying sending the photo and seeking to minimize the problem, differentiating his actions would not quell the calls for his resignation. On June 14, 2011, even President Barack Obama weighed in on the scandal: "If it was me, I would resign," a comment that stopped short of explicitly calling for Weiner's resignation but clearly demonstrating the wishes of the Democratic Party (Cillizza & Blake, 2011, p. A02). Finally, on June 16, 2011, Weiner acquiesced to political pressure and resigned from his congressional seat. During his resignation speech, he relied on the image repair strategies of bolstering, mortification, and, to a lesser degree, corrective action.

Possibly because he had provided a deeper apology 10 days prior, Weiner largely focused his resignation speech on the image repair strategy of bolstering. Bolstering occurs when the accused stresses his or her positive attributes in an attempt to deflect focus away from the offensive act. First, he thanked his constituents who had supported him throughout his political career. He stated, "It is particularly humbling to represent this district because the communities and families of the Ninth Congressional district are hard-working, they're patriotic, they're opinionated, they are authentic" (Weiner, 2011). Second, Weiner described his political story as a middle-class success: "I have never forgotten my neighbors because they represent the same middle-class story as mine. I went to public schools my whole life. My mother was a schoolteacher for 32 years. My father went to law school on the G.I. Bill. The middle-class story of New York is my story, and I'm very proud of that." Third, he thanked his staff. He stated, "They're young people who are not paid very much. They're people that work very hard and very long hours. Ultimately, those people define the notion

of service" (Weiner, 2011). These moments of bolstering sought to improve Weiner's image through graciously thanking those who had helped him.

Weiner used mortification by accepting responsibility for his actions and apologizing. He stated, "I am here today to again apologize for the personal mistakes I have made and the embarrassment I have caused. I make this apology to my neighbors and my constituents but I make it particularly to my wife, Huma" (Weiner, 2011). Along with apologizing to his wife, Weiner accepted responsibility for harming the reputation of the Democratic Party: "Unfortunately, the distraction that I have created has made that impossible, so today I'm announcing my resignation from Congress, so my colleagues can get back to work, my neighbors can choose a new representative."

In addition to mortification, Weiner used corrective action with regard to repairing his marriage and furthering his career. Corrective action occurs when the accused plans to undergo some rehabilitation to solve or prevent a reoccurrence of the transgression. With regard to his wife, Abedin, Weiner stated, "Most importantly, that my wife and I can continue to heal from the damage I have caused." Second, he sought to redeem himself through helping people even if outside of public service. He stated,

> I got into politics to help give voice to the many who simply did not have one. Now I'll be looking for other ways to contribute my talents to make sure that we live up to that most New York and American of ideals: the idea that leading a family, a community and ultimately a country is the one thing that all unites us, the one thing we're all focused on.

Although this statement of corrective action appears to have the right sentiment, this appeal came too late, after Weiner had so strongly denied that the photo was his during the first days of the scandal.

### *Phase II: Weiner's 2013 Campaign*

Weiner's attempted political comeback in 2013 came a short time after he had resigned from Congress in shame in 2011, making it appear all the more unlikely. This section focuses on the April 10, 2013, *New York Times Magazine* exposé of Weiner and his wife, Huma Abedin (Van Meter, 2013). The interview was a clear attempt to gauge the pulse of New York voters to determine if a political comeback was plausible, which is important for any discourse of renewal. Weiner and Abedin's third-party discourse sought to repair Weiner's image before officially announcing his candidacy for New York City mayor on May 22 (Barbaro, 2013). *New York Times Magazine* writer Jonathan Van Meter was provided widespread access to Weiner and Abedin's lives to demonstrate to voters that the couple had overcome his sex scandal and were seeking a return to political life (Van Meter, 2013). Weiner revealed the couple's desire to move on from his previous transgression: "We have been in a defensive crouch for so long. . . . We are ready to clear the decks on this thing." He provided measured comments about his desire to run for office again: "I don't have this burning, overriding desire to go out and run for office. . . . But I do recognize, to some degree, it's now or maybe never for me, in terms of running for something." During the *New York Times Magazine* interview, Weiner relied on bolstering, corrective action, differentiation, good intentions, and mortification, which were enhanced by Abedin's defense.

One of the ways that Weiner tried to bolster his image was by displaying his adoration for Abedin. He stated, "She is the most competent, graceful person I've met in all my years in politics. . . . And she's the hatchet woman! The person at the side of the principal is usually the bad guy." Weiner further bolstered when describing telling Abedin the truth about the sex scandal:

> There was the crime, there was the cover-up, there was harm I had done to her. And there's no one who deserved this less than

> Huma. That's really the bottom line. No one deserved to have a dope like me do that less than she did.

Weiner also bolstered himself by demonstrating humility and greater self-awareness. When discussing polling done by David Binder to determine if he would be a viable political candidate again, Weiner stated, "And there's a healthy number of people who will never get over it. . . . It's a little complicated because I always attracted a fairly substantial amount of people who didn't like me anyway. I am a bit of a polarizing case." Weiner's use of bolstering is illustrative of his postcrisis discourse of renewal approach. He wanted to visualize for New York voters a future Anthony Weiner candidate who cherished his wife and, in turn, would avoid future scandals.

The entire *New York Times Magazine* interview is an attempted exercise at corrective action and is indicative of his postcrisis discourse of renewal. Seeger and Ulmer (2002) explained that renewal strategies attempt to "energize efforts to rebuild and emphasize the potentially positive aspects of a crisis" (p. 127). Weiner's use of corrective action sought to reassure voters that he had learned from his mistakes and to frame his candidacy as a better person and, thereby, a viable candidate. Van Meter (2013) commented on the Weiners' candor: "Never has an interview felt so much like a therapy session." Weiner even alluded to the animus held against him and the possibility of the public not believing he had changed. He stated, "Some people just don't buy it . . . like they just don't have room for a second narrative about me." Later in the story, Van Meter described Weiner's emotional appreciation of Abedin giving him a second chance:

> Here, he paused and took a deep breath and started to cry. "She's given. . . ." He stopped again, could barely get the words out. "She's given me another chance. And I am very grateful for that. And I'm trying to make sure I get it right."

Moreover, Weiner tried to display that he was no longer a stereotypical politician who was measured in every statement he made. He stated,

> I'll probably get into trouble for stuff that I'll say in this piece, but I'm just at kind of a different place with that way of looking at stuff. It just doesn't feel comfortable anymore. And I think as a result, if I ever go back to doing politics again, I don't think I'll be as good at it.

He furthered his conviction of being a changed person, proclaiming, "I don't remember some of the skill to, like, be *that* guy." Much of being "that guy," according to Weiner, was pressing the issue as a politician, which he argued he'd tried to change: "I'm really trying hard to let things come to me a little bit more and be less about leaning in to every element of my life." Weiner's use of corrective action is indicative of his postcrisis discourse of renewal as he tries to gain donors and voters by visualizing a viable Weiner candidate who has learned from his sex scandal to become a more trustworthy politician.

The *New York Times Magazine* interview provided Weiner the opportunity to explain his actions in the wake of sending his infamous crotch picture to all of his 45,000 Twitter followers. Weiner used differentiation to explain his ardent denials about the authenticity of the photo as a means of protecting the truth from Abedin. He stated, "I lied to her. The lies to everyone else were primarily because I wanted to keep it from her."

Weiner also differentiated his actions from a serious infraction to a frivolous occurrence. He stated, "Since I didn't think I was doing anything that was all that serious in my mind, that the world wouldn't see it as being all that serious." This insinuation was that he did not think, at the time, that his Twitter behavior was a serious transgression, which was a consistent theme in the interview. Later, he stated,

> And if it wasn't 2011 and it [Twitter] didn't exist, it's not like I would have gone out cruising bars or something like that. It was just something that technology made possible and it became possible for me to do stupid things. I mean, the thing I did, and the damage that I did, not only hadn't it been done before, but it wasn't possible to do it before.

Even after admitting wrongdoing, Weiner continued to differentiate his sexually explicit messages to other women from physically cheating on his wife.

When Van Meter asked Weiner when his salacious Twitter behavior began, Weiner relied on good intentions. He discussed that social media gave him another outlet to interact with his constituents that eventually went awry. Weiner first explained the necessity of likeability as a politician: "By definition, when you are a politician, you want people to like you, you want people to respond to what you're doing, you want to learn what they want to hear so you can say it to them." This desire to connect to people to be a more responsive politician is what, according to Weiner, led him astray. "And it just started to blur into this desire to engage in it all the time. . . . So somewhere in there it got to a place where I was trying to engage people in nothing about being a politician."

Later in the *New York Times Magazine* story, Weiner uses mortification when discussing the pain he put Abedin through. He stated, "She's this amazing woman who did nothing wrong, who, to some degree, has people staring at her now on the subway because of what an idiot her husband was. And I feel bad about that. A lot." Weiner hoped readers would see this comment and believe his remorse was genuine. He clearly sought to highlight what a great woman Abedin was and that his conduct was reprehensible and regrettable.

### *Abedin Defense*

Rather than Weiner, Abedin became the star in the wake of the *New York Times Magazine* piece owing to her candor and courage throughout the interview (Weinger, 2013). Her third-party defense included vivid detail of her feelings as the truth of Weiner's Twitter scandal became clear:

> I felt like I couldn't breathe. I felt like I was in an airplane really high in the air, and all of a sudden, the plane is coming apart at the seams, and I am just doing all I can to hang on for dear life.

Even though Weiner's actions had torn apart their lives, Abedin forgave Weiner, which was a major aspect of the *New York Times Magazine* article. She gave a long account of her thought process for staying with him:

> He was my best friend. In addition to that, I loved him. There was a deep love there, but it was coupled with a tremendous feeling of betrayal. It took a lot of work, both mentally and in the way we engage with each other, for me to get to a place where I said: "O.K., I'm in. I'm staying in this marriage." Here was a man I respected, I loved, was the father of this child inside of me, and he was asking me for a second chance. And I'm not going to say that was an easy or fast decision that I made. It's been almost two years now. I did spend a lot of time saying and thinking: "I. Don't. Understand." And it took a long time to be able to sit on a couch next to Anthony and say, "O.K., I understand and I forgive." It was the right choice for me. I didn't make it lightly.

Abedin's statements in the *New York Times Magazine* article bolstered Weiner's discourse of renewal. She was honest and forthcoming

about her thoughts, which many times in the article took Weiner and his credibility to task. Yet, she was still able to forgive him and state as much in the article, which most likely helped Weiner's reputation with potential voters.

## EVALUATION

This section evaluates both phases of Anthony Weiner's defense discourse with regard to the plausibility of the strategies used and external data. First, this section uses polling data to assist in evaluating Weiner's image repair strategies during the first phase of his postcrisis discourse. Second, this section evaluates Weiner's image repair strategies in the *New York Times Magazine* article as an instance of postcrisis discourse of renewal. During this second phase, polling data are used to evaluate whether voters connected with Weiner's 2013 comeback candidacy. Third, this section evaluates Abedin's third-party defense of Weiner and how that may have helped his New York City mayoral bid.

### *Phase I*

Weiner's initial use of denial, defeasibility, and minimization after the Breitbart story emerged was a tragic miscalculation, which sullied his later attempts at bolstering, mortification, and corrective action. Weiner not only denied after the initial accusation but doubled down on that denial over the course of the next few days, which included enlisting a third-party defense from the woman to whom he was sending sexually explicit messages. His use of defeasibility to assert that he could not "say with certitude" that the lewd photo was of him was unwise and brought more scrutiny of the veracity of Weiner's claims, which lessened the effectiveness of his later use of mortification. Benoit (1997) argued that audiences may forgive the accused if they believe the apology is sincere and they deem the transgression is forgivable: "We are willing to forgive

some offenses more readily than others" (p. 264). In Weiner's case, the initial cover-up of his lewd Twitter photo seemingly damaged his credibility with New York voters more than the photo did alone. Polling data revealed mixed results about whether New Yorkers wanted Weiner to remain in office, but respondents did not want him to run for reelection. A June 9, 2011, Marist Poll found that 56% of constituents wanted Weiner to remain in office, yet only 30% said they would vote for him again in another election (Dwyer, 2011). A June 7, 2011, WABC-TV and SurveyUSA poll found that only 41% of New Yorkers thought Weiner should stay in office and that only 11% said they would vote for him again in another election (Blumenthal, 2011). On the basis of the inconsistency of his strategies and these poll numbers, we can conclude that the damage done by his initial denials made Weiner's defense discourse largely ineffective.

### *Phase II*

During his political comeback, I evaluate Weiner's discourse of renewal to be effective because of Abedin's third-party defense, which bolstered his use of corrective action. Abedin's honest and forthcoming depiction of her relationship with her husband humanized both of them, which enhanced Weiner's claims that he was a changed man. She was the stakeholder who had been harmed the most by the Twitter scandal, and her decision to continue to support Weiner might have allowed audiences to forgive Weiner for the Twitter scandal. Additionally, Weiner's discourse of renewal was effective because of his ability to garner political donations for his candidacy, which were aided by Abedin's third-party defense. Abedin's support solicited political donations that Weiner most likely would not have received if she had not supported him. Abedin remains an important aide to Hillary Clinton, and *Politico* found that the Weiner campaign had received more than $800,000 in political donations from Clinton friends and associates (Pillifant, 2013). Donor John Coale (as quoted in Palmeri, 2013) stated, "I sent

a contribution because Huma asked me to. I will continue to support him as long as Huma asks me to." Abedin's support enhanced Weiner's discourse of renewal, which allowed him to generate political donations to enhance his New York City mayoral candidacy.

Although Abedin's third-party defense enhanced his use of corrective action, Weiner's use of good intentions and differentiation to explain his sexually explicit behavior was unwise, because these strategies were not consistent with his postcrisis discourse of renewal. As Seeger and Ulmer (2002) noted, a renewal discourse can emphasize the positive aspects of a crisis to help energize the rebuilding effort. Weiner's use of good intentions and differentiation did not focus on a positive aspect of the crisis, nor did it visualize a stronger Weiner candidacy that had learned from his sex scandal. His suggestion "Is this risky behavior? Is this smart behavior? To me, it was just another way to feed this notion that I want to be liked and admired" was not believable and continued to evade responsibility for the Twitter sex scandal that cost him his congressional seat. In addition, suggesting that his use of Twitter was an attempt at connecting with his constituents in a more personal way that got out of control seems plausible, but admitting to not knowing that sending lewd photos over the Internet was risky was unwise, because it questioned his judgment and attempted to reduce the offensiveness of his actions. Weiner's *New York Times Magazine* interview was an attempt to persuade potential voters that he that would avoid future scandals, and these admissions deviated from his otherwise successful use of bolstering and corrective action as renewal strategies.

Even though Weiner could have provided a more consistent approach during his 2013 comeback, his poll numbers illustrated that the *New York Times Magazine* interview was a net success, given the impressive third-party defense from Abedin that bolstered his use of corrective action. Only a week after the *New York Times Magazine* piece was printed, an April 17, 2013, NBC New York/Marist poll revealed that if Weiner were to enter the New York City mayoral

race (he would not officially announce until May 21, 2013), he would start off in second place, with 15% of the vote (Schuppe, 2013). After officially announcing his candidacy, Weiner quickly gained support from voters, illustrating that his postcrisis discourse of renewal was successful. A June 25, 2013, *Wall Street Journal*–NBC New York–Marist poll revealed that Weiner was the leading candidate for mayor, holding a 5-point lead over challenger Christine Quinn (Saul, 2013). He maintained that lead going into a July 15, 2013, Quinnipiac University poll and was leading the New York City mayoral race with 25% of the vote (Fermino, 2013). These polls illustrated that, although Weiner may have lost the election to the eventual winner, Bill de Blasio, his renewal discourse, bolstered by Abedin's defense, visualized a successful New York City mayoral candidate for voters. Given the success of the *New York Times Magazine* interview, Weiner most likely would have remained a formidable candidate for New York City mayor had the July 23, 2013, Carlos Danger sexting scandal not occurred.

## DISCUSSION

After examining Weiner's defense discourse, this study offers several implications with regard to image repair research and political campaigns. First, the first phase of this analysis supports Blaney and Benoit's (2001) contention that maintaining consistency is important for an effective image repair attempt. President Bill Clinton's initial finger-wagging denial was a poor strategy given the likelihood of the investigation finding out that he had indeed had an inappropriate relationship with Monica Lewinsky. Similarly, Weiner should have assumed that an investigation into his Twitter account would have revealed that he sent the lewd photo and understood that he would have been better served by utilizing bolstering, mortification, and corrective action in his initial statements. In particular, his use of denial and defeasibility was

ineffective, especially the cavalier wit offered on Twitter about how technology had turned against him and his statement that he could not say with "certitude" if the picture was of him. In general, when a politician is guilty of the transgression of which he or she is accused, the politician should accept responsibility for the action, apologize to stakeholders his or her actions have affected, and engage in corrective action. Benoit (1997) argued that politicians have a difficult time using mortification during these crises because they know it probably represents the end of their political careers. Had Weiner initially admitted wrongdoing and engaged in mortification, he might have been able to stay in public office.

The first phase of Weiner's image repair efforts also supports that the perceived likeability and notoriety of a politician can influence the potential for a successful image repair effort. Whereas Grover and Hasel (2015) argued that Weiner's deviation from social norms is what led to an unsuccessful image repair attempt, it was more likely the perception of his character that did so. They noted that Clinton "was called the rock star president when first elected due to his youthful, contemporary image and his engaging, charismatic presence" (p. 184). Politicians who have larger-than-life personas, such as Clinton (Blaney & Benoit, 2001) and Ted Kennedy (Benoit, 1988), are able to continue to connect with audiences even in the midst of crisis. In contrast, Weiner was not well known by national audiences, and New Yorkers knew him as a fiery and often prickly congressman. His persona was that of a serious congressman, and his Twitter scandal was inconsistent with that persona. As Grover and Hasel (2015) noted, "part of how people react to leaders' sexual misconduct, therefore, has to do with how that leader has portrayed values in the past and the match between those espoused values and the misconduct that has been alleged" (p. 184). So although Weiner committed a transgression far less egregious than Clinton's, Weiner's actions were outside of the values he portrayed in the past, and subsequently,

audiences judged him harshly based on the values he espoused.

Weiner's Twitter scandal is an important case study to examine, not only because it is one of the first high-profile social media sex scandals, but also because his exploits never moved from the digital environment to the physical world. In most cases, the use of new technology, such as in Detroit mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's case (Griffin Padgett, 2014), led to the discovery of physical transgressions, such as extramarital affairs. Weiner's case illustrates some differences between digital misconduct and physical wrongdoing. Although his perceived character and inconsistent discourse hindered his image repair efforts, the explicit sexual misconduct Weiner displayed appeared to be perceived as less damaging than other sex scandals. Marist (Dwyer, 2011) and WABC-TV (Blumenthal, 2011) polls revealed that 41% of New Yorkers and 56% of constituents thought Weiner should remain in office. Much of the major backlash that was created during the scandal was authored by Weiner's incessant denial throughout the first week of the scandal. That poll numbers were so high after his strong attempt to cover up his mistakes illustrates that he would have had a chance to stay in office if he had used an immediate mea culpa. Furthermore, unlike other political sex scandal cases, the Twitter picture provided an attack against Weiner that was impervious to differentiation and denial. In our 21st-century media environment, the digitization of visual elements can intensify attacks against an actor either through the visceral nature of an image or, in Weiner's case, by using an IP address to link the actor to a specific act. Determining who posted material on the Internet and from what IP address is easy, which limits the type of appropriate image repair strategies an actor can employ.

The second phase of this analysis argues that future studies should examine political comebacks through the lens of a post-crisis discourse of renewal. Seeger and Ulmer (2002) explained that organizations adapt a discourse of renewal to portray a postcrisis future for stakeholders, ascertain assets, and focus on the positive

aspects of the crisis to help the rebuilding process. Anthony Weiner exhibited these postcrisis goals through his image repair discourse during his New York City mayoral comeback attempt. At the end of his initial Twitter scandal, only 11% of New York voters said they would vote for him again in another election (Blumenthal, 2011). The success of the *New York Times Magazine* interview illustrated that potential voters were willing to give him a second chance at public office. Along with voters, Weiner gained significant political donations through the third-party support of his wife, Huma Abedin. Her support bolstered Weiner's attempt to portray himself as a more humble and self-aware politician, in contrast to his reputation as a prickly congressman prior to the Twitter scandal. The use of corrective action further characterized the postcrisis version of Weiner as a changed man. His contention that "I don't remember some of the skill to, like, be *that* guy" clearly differentiates his personas before and after the scandal. By focusing on these positive changes, Weiner provided potential New York voters with a vision of a successful future mayoral tenure, which increased political donations as his poll numbers increased. Examining political comebacks as instances of postcrisis discourses of renewal is important because the discourse is focused on forging a successful future while mitigating the damage from past transgressions. Weiner's case study reveals a wholly ineffective image repair attempt during the immediate aftermath of his Twitter scandal, but his postcrisis discourse of renewal was effective (though short-lived) because of his focus on corrective action bolstered by the third-party defense of his wife, Huma Abedin.

Lastly, this article further supports that third-party defenses can enhance a political actor's image repair efforts (Griffin Padgett, 2014; Grover & Hasel, 2015; Wen et al., 2009). Huma Abedin's honesty in the *New York Times Magazine* story provided readers with an account of her pain throughout the scandal but also her forgiveness for Weiner. Her contribution to the *New York Times Magazine* article enhanced Weiner's discourse of renewal by supporting his

contention that he was a changed man. Abedin represented the enactment of an unstated Weiner campaign slogan: "give him another shot, Huma Abedin has." She discussed, in detail, why she decided to give Weiner a second chance, which paved the way for voters to give him another chance. Abedin's performance was lauded by critics, which added credibility to her third-party defense of her husband. In addition to support from critics and potential voters, Abedin's third-party defense provided the Weiner campaign with thousands of donations that could not have occurred without her support. Had Carlos Danger not come into the political lexicon, Huma Abedin just might have given Weiner the political capital to return to public office.

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# Vigilance Versus Complacency: Identifying Tenets of High-Reliability Organizations in Communities Facing Recurrent Crises

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This study explored the crisis communication strategies used by Fargo, North Dakota, city leaders to persuade residents to work as a community to withstand recurrent flood hazards in 1997, 2006, and 2009. In-depth interview data revealed that the residents identified aspects of all the characteristics of high-reliability organizations (HROs) in their perceptions of community leadership, communication, and crisis management strategies, suggesting that HRO principles may transfer to high-reliability communities.

**KEYWORDS:** Risk and crisis communication, high-reliability organizations, vigilance, complacency

The centrality of communication permeates all aspects of human endeavors but particularly risk and crisis situations. Novak and Sellnow (2009) observed that "risk issues in organizations frequently originate in or are complicated by communication" (p. 350). In a world where mistakes often lead to catastrophes, organizations, communities, and individuals are faced with challenges requiring the maintenance of the psychological constructs of vigilance.

*Vigilance* is defined as "the ability to sustain attention over a prolonged period of time" (Breckel, Giessing, & Thiel, 2011, p. 1754). Because vigilance has the potential to prevent or mitigate crises,

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communication scholars have considered how increased human attention may help. Whether by way of natural disasters, system failures, or human errors, human attention is required to maintain order and the smooth running of human affairs. However, physical and psychological variables can compromise vigilance (Butler & Gray, 2006; Edmunds & Morris, 2000; Endsley, 1996; Kapucu, 2008; Krahé et al., 2011; Larue, Rakotonirainy, & Pettitt, 2010; Reinerman-Jones, Matthews, Langheim, & Warm, 2010; Wang & Kapucu, 2007). To maintain vigilance, some communication strategies must be in place.

The best risk and crisis communication strategies are those geared toward prevention. Continuous vigilance facilitates crisis prevention, yet circumstances, such as reliance on routine procedures and narrowing of areas of focus, can weaken vigilance and breed mindlessness and complacency. Langer (1989) developed the concept of mindlessness as she contrasted this reliance on routine and complacency with mindfulness, which is associated with full engagement of the faculties in the task or activity at hand. Staying vigilant has helped some organizations to reduce the number of accidents and prevent crises from occurring. Such organizations are referred to as high-reliability organizations (HROs). These organizations "strive to prevent opportunity for error from becoming an occasion of error" (Weick, 1989, p. 127) and are noted for "failure-free organizational performance" (LaPorte & Consolini, 1991, p. 20).

In the face of potentially recurring natural disasters, a review of past practices suggests that communities could adopt some HRO communication strategies to keep their residents vigilant. However, minimal research has addressed the transfer of these communication strategies from the organizational level to the community level. This study explored the communication strategies used by Fargo, North Dakota, city leaders to persuade residents to work together to withstand the repetitive significant flood hazards in 1997, 2006,

and 2009 that threatened the city. What follows is the context for the present study, the conceptual framework, the method used to gather responses from community members, and the findings and directions for future research.

## CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

The context of this study revolves around a series of crisis situations caused by the recurring flooding from the Red River of the North experienced by the community of Fargo, North Dakota, from 1997 through 2011. In their study of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) assistance to flood disaster–prone communities, Kick, Fraser, Fulkerson, McKinney, and De Vries (2011) affirmed that "of all natural disasters, flooding causes the greatest amount of economic and social damage" (p. 510; see also Assanangkornchai, Tangboonngam, & Edwards, 2004; Huang, 2011; Opperman et al., 2009). What makes the context of the present study unique is the repetitive nature of the floods and their ongoing effects on the Fargo community.

To provide a chronological timeline for the present study, three specific years (1997, 2006, 2009) of flooding were identified as having had significant impacts on the Fargo, North Dakota, and Moorhead, Minnesota, communities (Hasbargen, 2011). In each of these years, predictions of serious flooding prompted a community-wide response to mitigate potential damage. For example, emergency services were activated, earthen and human-made dikes were constructed along the length of the river between the city's northern and southern borders, and community schools and businesses closed to enable students and residents to assist with sandbagging and emergency operations. These three flood years proved memorable due to the threat the flooding posed, the level of preparedness demonstrated by the community, and the lessons learned by city leaders and the public at large.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Researchers have agreed that crises occur in phases (Fink, 1986; Mitroff, 1994; Smith, 1990). Coombs (2007) identified three primary phases: precrisis, crisis, and postcrisis. Recognizing these crisis phases as cyclical, the focus of this study is on the postcrisis to precrisis period, considered as the learning and preparation phases (DiBella, Nevis, & Gould, 1996).

Learning from exemplary practices is one postcrisis strategy gaining popularity among crisis managers. Moore, Trujillo, Strarns, Basurto-Davila, and Evans (2009) affirmed that "understanding the factors contributing to success helps replicate successes in future" (p. 28). Researchers and practitioners have devoted time to understanding organizations that have successfully avoided crisis to identify the key to their success (Novak, 2006). Organizational theorists have proposed learning from HROs to reduce crises or diminish crises/disaster effects (Roberts, 1990; Weick, 1987; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). To further this line of study building on successful crisis containment, Novak and Sellnow (2009) suggested more testing of the theoretical model of participatory communication practices as a builder of collective mindfulness and community resilience.

Langer (1989) provided the most common understanding of mindfulness: a "state of alertness, and lively awareness . . . expressed in active information processing" (p. 138); conversely, mindlessness is a state in which individuals engage in minimal processing of information that is relevant to their current task. Mindfulness fosters vigilance, whereas mindlessness breeds complacency. Some organizations, in their crisis management and preparedness, have beaten complacency and remained vigilant; these are known as HROs.

### *High-Reliability Organizations*

Scholars have studied how organizations evolve from high risk to high reliability (Bierly & Spender, 1995; Ouchi, 1980; Perrow, 1984;

Rijpma, 1997; Rochin, La Porte, & Roberts, 1987; Weick, 1987; Weick & Roberts, 1993; Willcoxson & Millett, 2000; Wilkins & Ouchi, 1983; Williamson, 1975). HROs were found to "enact aggregate mental processes that are more fully developed than those found in organizations concerned with efficiency" (Weick & Roberts, 1993, p. 357). These actions make up the collective mind, leading to a collective mindfulness. Therefore, for HROs, collective mindfulness can be described as a system where everyone works both individually and together yet is acutely aware that small failures in safety protocols or processes can lead to catastrophic and adverse outcomes (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001).

Understanding how organizations that operate in high-risk, complex, hazardous, and tight-coupling systems function has challenged both researchers and practitioners (Ouchi, 1980; Perrow, 1984; Rochin et al., 1987; Weick, 1987; Wilkins & Ouchi, 1983). Because *human reliability* was defined by Weick (1989) as "the probability that a person (1) correctly performs some system-required activity in a required time period (if time is a limiting factor) and (2) performs no extraneous activity that can degrade the system" (p. 127), previous research has advanced principles enabling human beings to be more reliable in such systems. These principles include preoccupation with failure, reluctance to simplify, sensitivity to operations, commitment to resilience, and deference to expertise (Barrett, 2006; Bogue, 2009; Frankel, Leonard, & Denham, 2006). As these principles are related to complex and tightly coupled systems, they work in relationship with each other; as Bogue (2009) put it, they "tend to interpenetrate, inform, and influence one another" (p. 24). To these principles, Baker, Day, and Salas (2006) added teamwork in an effort to build resilience.

### *Community Resilience*

In crisis situations, communities need to stay focused and alert at all times, just as do HROs. For a community, resilience involves "the

ability of a system to sustain itself through adaptation and occasional transformation" (Magis, 2010, p. 412). Pfefferbaum (2005) added that community resilience can also be seen as "the ability of community members to take meaningful, deliberate, collective action to remedy the impact of a problem, including the ability to interpret the environment, intervene and move on" (p. 20). The argument has merit that resilient communities normally learn from hazards, disasters, and crises to cope, to adapt, and to reshape for possible changes (Magis, 2010). Community resilience, therefore, involves those systems in place that can determine a community's ability to mobilize and respond to any community threats (Landau & Saul, 2004).

For a community to be able to withstand the devastation often caused by disasters and crises, it must have some resources in place, including good leadership; people who are ready to follow; good financial security (which includes employment opportunities), family income, and assets; and investments in local infrastructure. According to Maybery, Pope, Hodgins, Hitchenor, and Shepherd (2009), all these resources, held together by relationships between neighbors and by social ties, lead to connectedness; good communication creates a strong sense of community. This sense of community is described as "high concern for community issues, respect for and service to others, sense of connection, and needs fulfillment" (Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, & Pfefferbaum, 2008, p. 134). These researchers observed that a sense of community gives rise to what they referred to as *tight coupling*, which is "the tendency to want individuals, groups and organizations to come together tightly to resist danger" (p. 138). This type of tight coupling only occurs if, in a crisis response, a community becomes aware that "changes in one component engender a response from other components" (p. 138).

### *Community Resilience and Collective Mind*

In explaining the difference between a community's collective mind and a group or organization, Weick and Roberts (1993) described a

collective as "individuals acting as if they are a group" (p. 360), aware that a failure from any quarter affects the whole. When individuals in a community have experienced the repeated occurrence of disasters, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, wildfires, tornadoes, and/or floods, they may stay vigilant or become complacent. However, when community members have been able to repeatedly prevent crisis situations from escalating into catastrophes, some special communication characteristics may have influenced their ability to remain vigilant, prompting the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent are principles of HROs evident in the perceptions of Fargo, North Dakota, community members about how the city leaders managed the recurrent flood crises?

RQ2: How were complacency and vigilance reflected in the perceptions of the Fargo residents who had experienced repeated flood crises?

## METHOD

To provide answers for the research questions examining the crisis management program and communication strategies that helped the Fargo, North Dakota, community contain the recurring flood disasters threatening the community, a qualitative research methodology was chosen (Ritchie, 2003). Semistructured, in-depth interviews provided the data for the present study (Fontana & Frey, 2003).

### *Geographic Area of Study*

The geographic areas of danger in Fargo, North Dakota, marked by FEMA as the most affected by the repetitive flood disasters, were identified. These areas included specific neighborhoods following along the banks of the Red River of the North from the northernmost boundary of the city to its southernmost boundary. These

riverfront areas were divided by city managers into 11 danger zones. From each of these 11 danger zones, the researchers sought two residents who met the criteria of (a) being affected in some way by the repetitive flood disasters, (b) having lived in the danger area for at least 15 years, and (c) being willing to participate in the study.

### *Identification of Participants*

A total of 24 participants were interviewed. A snowball convenience sample target number of 22 interviewees (2 per danger zone) was initiated, using opinion leaders familiar with the community who knew of individuals who had lived in one of the 11 danger zones for an extended period of time. As the interviews progressed, participants were asked to recommend other residents meeting the criteria. To increase the robustness of the responses, when multiple participants from the same danger zone were identified, some effort was made to include young, middle-aged, and older adults of both sexes. In addition, once saturation was noted, two additional individuals not living in the danger areas but who had participated in the flood fights were included to provide possible alternative perspectives.

Of the 24 participants, 16 were men, whereas 8 were women. The participants were well educated: Four members of the sample had a doctoral degree, 5 had a master's degree, 1 had a professional degree, and 12 had college degrees. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to older than 61 years. The shortest number of years any of the respondents had lived in Fargo was 20 years, whereas the longest number was 83 years. The longest number of years lived by participants in their current residences was 44 years, whereas the shortest was 18 years. Some ($n$ = 20) of the respondents said that they had sandbagged their properties to save them from flooding, while 4 had never sandbagged their properties. While 19 respondents said they had never had flood damage, 5 people had experienced damage to their residences. Twenty-three respondents purchased flood

insurance, and 1 person did not. Ethnicity was not considered as a variable in the study.

### *The Instrument*

In developing the instrument, the researchers adopted a qualitative interview design (Janesick, 1998), drawing from the style of questioning that starts with phrases such as “can you describe how,” “how do you see,” and “to what extent would you.” The questionnaire met the tests of face and content validity when reviewed by crisis communication and emergency management content experts. Although 10 different primary questions were asked of participants, 4 questions provided data for the present study. In response to RQ1, two questions provided data: (a) “Did you ever think that the Fargo community would fail to control the flood? Why or why not?” and (b) “How did your experience in previous floods affect the way you responded to each new flood crisis?” Addressing RQ2, the remaining two questions included the following: (c) “Would you characterize the Fargo community as complacent or vigilant (or both) during the flood crisis?” and (d) “Would you consider yourself or the Fargo community as resilient? Can you tell me more?” A trial interview was conducted prior to engaging actual participants.

### *Analysis*

Institutional review board approval for this study was granted. Data analysis followed the process identified by Marshall and Rossman (1999). Every interview was recorded and transcribed before the next interview to observe the nature of the data being collected as compared with previously gathered data. During the transcription process, a group of students was recruited to listen to each recording, compare the recording with the transcript, and confirm the accuracy and correctness of the transcription. After 18 interviews, a repetition of some information and descriptions

signaled that saturation was approaching. However, the interviews continued until all 24 were completed, including the addition of two participants from outside the crisis zones.

Once the data were transcribed and analyzed, of the 2,782 lines of transcribed data, 1,967 lines, equivalent to 71% of the entire data set, were available for analysis, with the remaining 815 lines generated by demographic information, and interview questions made up the remaining 29.2%. Of the 1,967 lines, 646 lines of data, equivalent to 33%, pertained to the four specific questions used in the present study.

The coding process followed Corbin and Strauss (2008), with open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During the open coding phase, each transcript was read four times as the first step of the analysis. After the first and second reading, key sentences and phrases related to the general research questions were highlighted. During the subsequent readings, relevant sentences and phrases were grouped together under each interview question. The process of axial coding used the constant comparison approach and involved reading through the grouped sentences and phrases to form themes. The selective coding process involved using the major themes as categories and returning to the data to identify examples that depicted the themes. At this point of the coding process, concepts and themes were tied together to answer each research question.

## RESULTS

### *Research Question 1*

In response to the first research question, two themes emerged: perceptions about the potential for failure to hold back the flood and the learning that had occurred from previous flood experiences. Exemplars from the data reveal the nature of the comments made by the participants.

*Potential for failure.* The responses from the first question asking if the participant ever thought the community would fail to control the flood varied. Perceptions were grouped into three separate themes to represent those who said yes in reference to the first flood in 1997 (e.g., "yes, in '97, I thought we were going to experience the same thing as Grand Forks"); those who said yes as a possibility when referring to the 2006 flood (e.g., "you have to have that fear to keep you vigilant"); and those who said no, with or without reason, when speaking of the 2009 flood (e.g., "we have more experience in fighting the flood").

*Learning from previous floods.* The second question, seeking how previous experiences affected the way participants responded to each new crisis, generated many responses expressing the residents' perceptions about Fargo during the repeated flood crises. The responses generated for this question were grouped under the themes of learning generally (e.g., "learning surely improved" and "the more we have been having the flood, the more knowledge everybody has"), learning about the process of flood fighting (e.g., "I learned how to prepare before the flood came" and "how to fill the sandbags"), learning about the necessary equipment and hardware needed to fight a flood (e.g., "we buy backup pumps"), general negative experience (e.g., "you just feel like, not this again"), and positive experience (e.g., "I am much calmer" and "the sequence became easier").

### *Research Question 2*

To answer this research question, two of the interview questions revealed residents' perceptions about the presence of some psychological constructs, such as complacency, vigilance, and resilience, both among the residents themselves and among the city leaders: "Would you characterize the Fargo community as complacent or vigilant (or both) during the flood crises?" and "Would you consider yourself or the Fargo community as resilient? Can you tell me more?"

Two overarching themes emerged, including perceived complacency or vigilance about the community and self-characterized resiliency in the face of recurrent crises.

*Complacent or vigilant (or both).* The responses to the question about perceived complacency or vigilance (or both) were grouped into two subthemes, one representing vigilance following the initial flood of 1997 (e.g., “the community is definitely vigilant” and “there is nothing complacent about the community”) and the other encompassing both vigilance and complacency (e.g., “those directly next to the river are vigilant, but people a distance away from it became more complacent, saying they handled it before, they can handle it again”).

*Self-characterized resiliency.* In answering the second question, residents evaluated their own resilience versus the community’s resilience. The responses were grouped into four subthemes: individual resilience (e.g., “I am resilient; I do bend”), community resilience (e.g., “Fargo community is amazingly resilient”), resilience naturally (e.g., “you have to be resilient to survive not just the flood but the weather” and “there is still a settler or a pioneer type spirit in the people”), and actions that entail resilience (e.g., “staying awake all night and getting up very early in the morning”).

### *Additional Insight Gained From Probes*

Additional information was generated from probing questions asking interviewees to clarify or add anything more they may have had to say about the flood that had not been covered by the other interview questions. Three themes emerged, including identification of the stakeholders, the roots of success, and self-reliance.

*Stakeholders in the flood fight.* This theme identified the residents’ recounting of all the various roles played by people involved with the flood who may or may not have had something to gain or lose in the fight, including “property owners,” “the neighborhoods,” “people who came in buses just to help,” “city workers,” “county

workers," "city hall people who were trying to think through the process," "men and women who made sandwiches at church basements," "the National Guard," "the Army Corps of Engineers," "the TV and radio folks," "the police," and "the fire department."

*Root of success.* The statements under this theme represented the residents' expression of the thoughts and actions they perceived as having contributed to their initial and subsequent successes in the flood fights, including "the first [flood fight] was a kind of hurried thing, but we learned"; "the city was much more organized"; "my job was not to protect my property, I am also protecting the neighbors who live a block or two away"; and "another thing that was extremely important is the mobilization of the neighborhood."

*Self-reliance.* The statements grouped under this theme represented the perceptions of the residents, suggesting that they were ready to work for their survival, even as they expected help from the city: "I know what needed to be done here, that is my problem"; "I call friends, neighbors, and relatives, and we start doing it"; "we didn't fold our fingers and wait for help"; and "if the neighborhood is not mobilized as it is, the city can bring all the stuff they want, but they would never have been so successful."

## DISCUSSION

### *Community Vigilance Through High-Reliability Organization Principles*

On the basis of the comments of the participants, the Fargo community demonstrated all of the HRO principles through its years of fighting the floods. The first principle, *preoccupation with failure,* describes a situation of "adopting the mindset that anything can go wrong at any time" (Bogue, 2009, p. 22). In relation to this principle, the findings reveal that residents, as well as city leaders, were preoccupied with failure, as seen in statements such as "it was really helpful that we could all be coordinated, because if one neighbor fails, we all fail."

*Reluctance to simplify* reminds HROs never to treat any operation as if it had been done before. HROs strive for “a balance between components such as principles and experience, anticipation and resilience, input and demand, routine and non-routine, flux and order” (Weick, 2011, p. 22). The findings suggest that residents of the Fargo community had this principle in place through training of the residents to maintain that balance between principles and experience, such as “preliminary planning” and “early warnings.” There also were continuous training experiences to keep residents remain mindful of the potential hazards of a flood crisis: “how to build the sandbags, where to lay them, and how to lay them” and “communications between neighbors themselves, keeping each other up to date.”

The principle of *sensitivity to operations* is evident when HROs treat every operation with “a widespread concern for, if not awareness of, the granular details of routine operations” (Bogue, 2009, p. 24). In the Fargo flood fights, this principle was visible, as evident in findings where residents explained the roles they played to keep the flood under control, such as “a couple of nights I stayed up watching the dikes all night” and “making sure things are working well.”

*Deference to expertise* describes HROs’ dramatic shift in operational decision making. When the unexpected occurs, decision making shifts to the experts, regardless of status level (Frankel et al., 2006). This principle was present among the Fargo community, as shown by the statement that “the city engineers gave way to the Army Corps of Engineers. The city engineering department was in control of all dikes and they make major decisions but when the unexpected happens, the Army Corps of Engineers as experts usually intervened.”

A *commitment to resilience* compels the HROs to give quick and complete attention to the most minute sign of error (Bogue, 2009). This principle was prevalent in the process of vigilance maintenance in the Fargo community during the flood fights. From the

findings of this study, the residents perceived that Fargo officials made corrections in later floods when errors were noted: "They had a list and after each flood they got together and went over the things that they failed to see in the previous flood."

### *Vigilance Through High-Reliability Organization Tenets*

To maintain order and vigilance in complex systems, Williamson (as cited in Bierly & Spender, 1995) suggested a focus on the self-interest of the actors. The data show that one of the factors motivating the Fargo residents in the flood fight was self-interest (e.g., "we are on the front line of defense. . . . If our home floods, everybody goes").

According to how high-reliability systems develop, the introduction of culture plays a very significant role (Bierly & Spender, 1995). Weick (1987) and Wilkins and Ouchi (1983) held culture and learning to be the bases on which high reliability is built; Bierly and Spender (1995) stated that "the existence of culture indicates shared knowledge" (p. 644). Evidence from the transcripts shows that shared learning during subsequent flood fights in 2006 and 2009 built a culture of shared knowledge among the residents of the Fargo community. One such confirming statement follows: "We know what to do and when to do them, because of the roles that people had had, in previous floods, we sort of know how things are going to fit together, if it happens again."

Residents learned from experience to live what Smart et al. (2003) described as an individual's personal concern, where "personnel are trained and cultured to accept and perpetuate the view that when they see a problem they 'own it' until they solve it or until somebody else who can solve it, takes responsibility" (p. 736). The common feeling among the residents was "I know what needed to be done here, that is my problem." The aggregate examples presented in the preceding section suggest that key features of HROs have developed in the Fargo community.

Another important finding from this study that supports the

suggestion that the Fargo community has demonstrated characteristics of HROs was revealed in the community use of communication: “City officials [are] always on air talking about it” and “we got all the information we needed.” With statements such as these, participants illustrated that communication wove the community together in an interrelationship that worked effectively. With good, helpful, constant, and necessary communication, Fargo city leaders were able to tie the community together, a community in which, “when you sandbagged, everybody was out there, from the judge to the doctors, everybody fit together,” “so you got to know everybody on a personal level.”

## IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study identify each of the five HRO principles: preoccupation with failure, reluctance to simplify, sensitivity to operations, deference to expertise, and commitment to resilience. The theoretical implication suggests that, if these principles are found in the Fargo community, they may be found in other communities. Consequently, if these principles exist in Fargo, North Dakota, then the community is running a high-reliability system, making it a high-reliability community (HRC). If the Fargo community can run as a high-reliability system, perhaps other communities also can function as high-reliability systems. Thus this study has laid the groundwork for future studies to determine more purposefully if the HRO process can be transferred to HRCs. However, the ability to become an HRC may be dependent on the commitment of community leaders and residents to be vigilant and the structural capacity to do what is needed to mitigate the effect of an impending crisis.

Another construct to consider is resilience. As Magis (2010) concluded, “resilient communities . . . learn to cope with, adapt to and shape change” (p. 404). If the perceptions of those most

directly affected by the crisis of recurrent flooding are indicative of the perceptions of the community at large, an overwhelming expression of resilience was noted. Resilience as a characteristic was visible among both city leaders and residents. For example, participants suggested that "there is still a settler or a pioneer type spirit in the people," "you have to be resilient to survive not only the flood but the winter," and "there is a bunch of resilience built into the people."

This phenomenon of resilience as characterized by a particular type of person may have some significance when considering the claim of Tidball, Krasny, Svendsen, Campbell, and Helphand (2010) that "interacting with nature . . . offers a means of resistance and resilience" (p. 592). Being subjugated to the elements of nature and striving to dominate those elements may have some significance in explaining the resilience found among Fargo residents. However, this assumption has not been tested and warrants further study.

## CONCLUSION

This exploratory study ventured into two areas of study that have not received much attention in crisis communication: (a) exploring the presence of complacency during repetitive natural hazards with the potential to become disasters and (b) exploring the possibility of transferring HRO tenets and principles to communities, resulting in their transformation into HRCs. The research on this topic should be ongoing to strengthen these findings and to fully extend high reliability in the face of repeated crises affecting community life.

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# Information Retention Related to Emergency Contraception Among College Students Over a 2-Month Period

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The release of over-the-counter forms of emergency contraception (EC) has created a need to study the knowledge and intentions of young people. The current study was a pretest–posttest randomized experiment with a 2-month follow-up posttest to understand the intentions of college students to use EC. A total of 274 participants completed the survey, which comprised a pretest with knowledge questions related to EC. Those in the experimental group read an informative message related to EC. All participants completed the survey measures and the knowledge questions as a posttest. Knowledge, condition, severity, vulnerability, benefits, and barriers influenced behavioral intention. Knowledge remained stable after 2 months, and participants with greater knowledge reported increased intent to use EC.

**KEYWORDS:** Health belief model, health communication, emergency contraception, information retention, knowledge gain

Each year in the United States, there are many unintended pregnancies. The data on unintended pregnancies lag behind the current time period by a few years, but in 2008, there were 3.7 million unintended pregnancies; the number decreased to 3.14 million in 2010, and in 2012, for all of North America, 51% of pregnancies were unintended (Finer & Zolna, 2014; Kost, 2015; Sedgh, Singh, & Hussain, 2014). The reduction of unintended pregnancy is one of the reproductive health goals of the U.S. Department of Health

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and Human Services (2012) Healthy People 2020 initiative. If a couple does not use contraception, a condom fails, or the woman had a lapse in her hormonal birth control, then one way that a woman can avoid an unintended pregnancy is to take the pill form of emergency contraception (EC; Alford, Lappin, Wells, Barone, & Dalton, 2010). This is necessary because during any instance of heterosexual intercourse, there is a 25% chance that a woman will be ovulating that day or within the 5 days that follow, which could lead to a pregnancy (Li, Wilcox, & Dunson, 2015). Recently, the pill form of EC has been made available through pharmacies without a prescription, with the only limiting factor being that the buyer must be at least 15 years old (Bradley, 2013).

The relatively new over-the-counter availability to young people, their knowledge of how EC works, and how to increase this knowledge are all areas that could use further investigation. Research has shown that individuals generally support the use of EC and view it favorably, but there is little research regarding what influences these feelings and how these elements could be used to increase intent to use the product (Ellertson, Shochet, Blanchard, & Trussell, 2000). The current study is looking to better understand the knowledge that college students have related to EC and how this, along with elements of the health belief model (HBM), might influence intentions to use and, ultimately, future use of EC. Different variables will influence intent to use EC, and the current study predicts that each of the four constructs of the HBM—vulnerability, severity, benefits, and barriers—will work to increase awareness and intent (D'Souza, Zyngier, Robinson, Schlotterlein, & Sullivan-Mort, 2011). An area of concern regarding EC is the lack of knowledge among those most at risk for unintended pregnancies (18- to 24-year-olds; Finer & Zolna, 2014). The current study employs an educational message to see if knowledge of EC can be increased and then maintained over the course of 2 months.

## EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION AND PREGNANCY

EC decreases the chance of a woman becoming pregnant by prohibiting or delaying ovulation (Office of Population Research, 2012). EC differs from other types of contraception because it is taken after intercourse has occurred and on a one-time basis, whereas other methods are used in a regularly scheduled sequence, usually daily or monthly. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the use of EC for a variety of reasons but mostly because it does not interact with other drugs, it will not cause birth defects, and there is no danger of addiction (Harper, Weiss, Speidel, & Raine-Bennet, 2008). There are multiple versions of EC in a one-time-use pill form, available without a prescription, and although they are produced by different companies, they are all relatively the same and will be referenced in this study as EC.

Unintended pregnancies and the abortions that sometimes follow could be avoided through the use of EC (Haynes, 2007; Kısa, Zeyneloğlu, Yılmaz, & Verim, 2012). Increasing the awareness that individuals can purchase EC in advance of needing it can be crucial because those who had EC available prior to unprotected sex were three times more likely to use it than those who had to purchase EC after the sexual act (Lo, Fan, Ho, & Glasier, 2004).

## HEALTH BELIEF MODEL

The HBM has been used to study what influences individuals to perform certain health behaviors (Allen et al., 2010; Janz & Becker, 1984). Perceived vulnerability, severity, benefits, and barriers make up the four constructs of the HBM (D'Souza et al., 2011). These work together to influence behavior, and the first element is when an individual looks at the potential threat of an action or inaction by thinking about how vulnerable the individual is to negative

consequences and the severity of the consequences (Marlow, Waller, Evans, & Wardle, 2009). Next, the individual looks at the benefits of an act and the potential barriers that would make taking action difficult. These four variables together have been successful in explaining what influences someone to take a recommended action related to his or her health (Harrison, Mullen, & Green, 1992).

The first element of the model is vulnerability, and for someone to have a desire to make a change regarding his or her health, the person must feel vulnerable or at risk for a negative health outcome (Janz & Becker, 1984). When it comes to using EC, the individual must feel that he or she is at risk for an unintended pregnancy. The population most vulnerable for unintended pregnancy comprises individuals under 24 years of age, as they have the highest rate of unintended pregnancy among any age group (Finer & Zolna, 2011, 2014; Meyer, Gold, & Haggerty, 2011). Eighty-three percent of pregnancies for women aged 18–19 years were reported as being unintended, and for those aged 20–24 years, 64% of pregnancies were unintended (Finer & Zolna, 2011). The increased vulnerability that comes from the amount of unprotected heterosexual intercourse makes this a prime population to study in terms of knowledge and intention to use EC (Brening, Dalve-Endres, & Patrick, 2003; Harper, Cheong, Rocca, Darney, & Raine, 2005).

The next element of the HBM is severity, and this relates to the seriousness of becoming pregnant and any physical or social consequences (Carpenter, 2010; Janz & Becker, 1984). Along with the risk of unintended pregnancy comes an increase in abortions. Young women between the ages of 20 and 24 years of age accounted for one-third (32.9%) of all abortions in the United States in 2010 (Pazol, Creanga, Burley, Hayes, & Jamieson, 2013). For individuals to change their actions, they must feel that becoming pregnant would severely impact their lives. A group of college women indicated that they would be motivated to use EC to avoid pregnancy because of their family values and because being pregnant would interfere with

their education and career goals (Hickey & White, 2015). A high percentage of unintended pregnancies and the abortions that follow help to indicate the vulnerability of young people and support that these pregnancies could have a severe impact on their lives. The influence of vulnerability and severity of unintended pregnancies on the intention to use EC or to purchase it for a sexual partner is investigated.

After weighing feelings of severity and vulnerability, an individual will look to see if a proposed change will be beneficial. The individual looks at whether the recommended action is feasible and if it will protect him or her from the health threat (Carpenter, 2010; Janz & Becker, 1984). Two important benefits to using EC are that it can greatly decrease the chances of an unintended pregnancy occurring and that it is easy to use, which satisfies both feasibility and efficaciousness (Glasier & Baird, 1998; Janz & Becker, 1984). EC is regarded as a medicine that is easy to use because it is available as a single dose in the form of a pill. A lesser known benefit is that EC can be used up to 5 days after having unprotected sex, but as time goes on, the effectiveness decreases (Office of Population Research, 2012). There is a lack of knowledge related to when EC needs to be taken to be effective, and this is an area where expanded knowledge could greatly influence the decisions that an individual or a couple make regarding their potential pregnancy (Mackin, Clark, McCarthy, & Farris, 2015; Yen, Parmar, Lin, & Ammerman, 2015). Another benefit is that individuals have the opportunity, if they purchase EC in advance of needing it, to share it with a friend (Ziebland et al., 2005). Although it is easy to use and has a wide window of time when it can be used, there certainly are issues that could limit or detract from using EC.

Women face many barriers in using EC; according to the HBM, barriers are any negative aspects that come from taking a health action or issues that prevent an individual from taking the action (Janz & Becker, 1984). One barrier is that some young people are

not aware of EC and that it can prevent unintended pregnancy (Johnson, Nshom, Nye, & Cohall, 2010; Mollen et al., 2008). Teenage girls were found to have limited knowledge of EC, and even though they claimed to have heard of EC, they were unable to provide any specific details about its use (Goyal, Zhao, & Mollen, 2009; Mollen et al., 2008). This lack of knowledge is a barrier to EC use (Kısa et al., 2012). Knowledge of the availability of EC is an issue, as 84.5% of almost 700 college students did not know that EC was available on their campuses (Miller, 2011), and in another sample of more than 2,000 college women, 74% did not know that EC was available from a pharmacy without a prescription (Mackin et al., 2015). Another group of college students had a greater understanding that EC was available at pharmacies, but even so, 60% of women and 57% of men were unaware that it was available (Yen et al., 2015). Increasing the knowledge surrounding EC and its availability in local pharmacies and at college health centers is important. Even if individuals are aware of EC, other barriers still exist, such as feelings of embarrassment and finding transportation to a pharmacy (Hickey & White, 2015; Johnson et al., 2010; Mollen et al., 2008; Ziebland et al., 2005). Embarrassment and exposure related to their purchasing and using EC were concerns. Women mentioned that they were unsure, if they used their health insurance, whether their parents would find out, and others mentioned that buying EC in public was a concern (Hickey & White, 2015; Johnson et al., 2010). Another barrier listed by college women was cost, and although they recognized that the cost of EC was far less than the cost of having a child, it was still presented as a barrier (Hickey & White, 2015; Johnson et al., 2010). There are limited physical side effects from taking EC, with the most common ones being nausea, vomiting, fatigue, and headaches (Haynes, 2007).

When weighing benefits and barriers, the HBM creates a single variable by averaging each variable and then subtracting the perceived barriers from the perceived benefits (Janz & Becker, 1984).

If this single variable is positive, then the benefits of using EC outweigh the barriers. There are both benefits and barriers when it comes to using EC, and determining which is most influential is important. Therefore, we present the following hypotheses:

H1: Vulnerability, related to unintended pregnancy, will positively influence behavioral intention to use or purchase EC.
H2: Severity, related to unintended pregnancy, will positively influence behavioral intention to use or purchase EC.
H3: Benefits and barriers will positively influence behavioral intention to use or purchase EC.
H4: Viewing an informative message related to EC will positively influence behavioral intention at the 2-month posttest.
H5: Knowledge in the experimental group will remain constant at the 2-month posttest.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The sample was drawn from undergraduate college students enrolled at a large public university in the southern United States. In total, 400 students received an e-mail detailing the study and describing their opportunity to participate. The students who participated were members of a large introductory communication course and were chosen because they were from a variety of majors and were in the age group most at risk for unintended pregnancy. The sample, at the pretest, comprised 102 men and 172 women, for a total of 274 participants who averaged 18.3 years of age. Men were included because of their ability to purchase EC for their partners, their ability to influence the decisions of their partners if they have unprotected heterosexual intercourse, and because of the lack of representation in prior studies regarding EC (Johnson et al., 2010; Yen et al., 2015). Having the opportunity to influence is important

because to make an informed decision, they too need to be aware of EC. The study had a response rate of 68.5% on the pretest. In terms of race, White (86%) was selected most often, while Asian (7%) was the next highest racial group reported, followed by African American (5%). These results were consistent with the racial makeup of the university enrollment. A large portion of the sample reported having engaged in heterosexual intercourse (73%). There were 92 participants in the comparison group, with 35 men and 57 women, and 182 in the experimental condition, with 68 men and 114 women. There were no significant differences between the experimental groups on any demographic characteristics.

### *Design*

The study included a pretest, posttest, and 2-month follow-up posttest with a comparison and experimental group. This design was chosen because, in their overview of EC research, Fitzpatrick and Walton-Moss (2011) indicated that studies with longer follow-up periods are needed when it comes to testing messages related to EC. The message was delivered online because young people have indicated that with the sensitive subject of EC, they would prefer Internet-based information rather than interacting directly with adults (Hickey & White, 2015; Johnson et al., 2010). The research was reviewed and approved by the university's institutional review board. Participants were contacted via an e-mail, which contained information about the study and a link to the survey, which directed participants to a secure website where they were placed in either the experimental or comparison group. The e-mail randomly assigned participants at a 2:1 sample delineation to the experimental group. This was done in an attempt to increase the participant pool at the 2-month posttest who were in the experimental group. Participants were informed that it was a two-part study and that, after completing the initial survey, each participant would create a unique identifier that was known only to him or her. This allowed

for matching of answers across the surveys. Each participant answered basic knowledge questions related to EC. After answering these questions, the experimental group read a message related to EC, and the comparison group read a message about the flu vaccine, then each group completed the survey. The comparison group did not see the message related to EC. The same knowledge questions were asked of each group near the end of each survey to better understand the impact of the message and serve as the posttest. All participants were contacted 2 months later via e-mail and asked to complete a short follow-up survey that contained the knowledge questions and measures. All participants were offered extra credit for their participation.

### *Measures*

Ten questions were asked to measure knowledge related to EC. Some of these questions were modified from an EC knowledge measure by Reed, Vaughn, and Pomerantz (2012), while others were highlighted in the stimulus used in the current study. Example questions included the following: "Have you ever heard of emergency contraception, sometimes called the morning after pill?" and "How long after unprotected sex can you take emergency contraception and still have it work?" (Reed et al., 2012). These questions were dichotomous when necessary and multiple choice when appropriate.

All of the following measures were scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The Behavioral Intention scale was modified from a scale regarding the HPV vaccine and had a total of five questions that looked at intentions to use or purchase EC in the event of unprotected sex or failure of contraception, such as a condom breaking (Gerend & Barley, 2009). Some of the statements were as follows: "I will get emergency contraception just in case I need it in the future," "I will consider using emergency contraception or encouraging my partner to do so if we have unprotected sex," and "If a healthcare

provider offered me emergency contraception in the next year I would get it."

The Perceived Severity scale was modified from one related to the HPV vaccine and used four statements related to the effects of having an unintended pregnancy (Gerend & Barley, 2009). One component of the severity scale was "Having an unintended child would be disruptive to my social life." Perceived vulnerability was measured with four statements that were modified from the Perceived Vulnerability to Disease questionnaire (Cismaru & Lavack, 2006; Courneya & Hellsten, 2001; Duncan, Schaller, & Park, 2009). One vulnerability statement was as follows: "Personally I feel vulnerable to having an unintended child while in college."

Scales for benefits and barriers were used as well and were created based on studies related to EC and known benefits and barriers to intention to use or purchase EC (Goyal et al., 2009; Haynes, 2007; Miller, 2011; Mollen et al., 2008). There were five components to the benefits measure, one of which was "I would be willing to use emergency contraception or encourage my partner to use it because there are no serious side effects." There were eight statements related to barriers, with one being "I would not take emergency contraception or encourage my partner to take it because I worry about the side effects."

Questions related to demographics, sexual experience, number of sexual partners, prior use of EC, dating preference (same sex or opposite sex), current dating status, moral or religious objections to EC, previous pregnancy, and intentions to get pregnant in the near future were asked.

### *Stimulus Message*

The stimulus message that was seen by the experimental group contained information about when to use EC, such as after heterosexual intercourse when no birth control was used or when birth control failed (i.e., a condom breaking). It provided information

related to how long after unprotected sex (5 days) EC can be used as well as information regarding side effects, lack of complications, and availability (Ellertson et al., 2000; Haynes, 2007; Johnson et al., 2010; Kısa et al., 2012; Raymond et al., 2009). Information was included that indicated that the sooner EC was used, the better chance the woman would have of not getting pregnant. The lack of side effects and the distinction that EC is not the abortion pill were included. Some basic sexual health information was provided to encourage individuals to practice safe sex, because EC does not protect against sexually transmitted infections. Finally, the message informed the experimental group that the information in the message was gathered from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and Princeton University's Emergency Contraception Website (Office of Population Research, 2012). The CDC and WHO websites were chosen because of their credibility related to health, and the Princeton site was included because of its status as a leading site for EC information.

## RESULTS

The initial step in the analysis was to check the scales for reliability. Each of the scales was reliable, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from .83 to .97. The first three hypotheses predicted that the variables of the HBM (vulnerability, severity, benefits, and barriers) would positively influence the dependent variable, behavioral intention, and this was tested through regression. These hypotheses were supported as the results demonstrated that the HBM variables played a significant role in predicting intent to use EC by explaining 60% of the variance, $R^2 = .60$, $F(3, 254) = 126.90$, $p < .001$. Benefits and barriers had the greatest effect, $\beta = .69$, $p < .001$; next was severity, $\beta = .18$, $p < .001$, and, finally, vulnerability, $\beta = .13$, $p = .001$. Additional demographic variables such as sexual experience, number

of sexual partners, prior use of EC, dating preference (same sex or opposite sex), current dating status, moral or religious objections to EC, previous pregnancy, and intentions to get pregnant were added individually to the model, but none were significant contributors.

Pretest knowledge was analyzed, and 96% ($n$ = 263) of the participants answered correctly that EC would not protect them from sexually transmitted infections. Just under half (49%, $n$ = 134) recognized that EC is not the same as RU-486 (the abortion pill). Only 13 individuals (5%) accurately identified that a woman can wait up to 5 days before taking EC and still have it be effective. Those in the experimental group had more correct answers on the posttest than did those in the comparison group, where 67% ($n$ = 122) recognized that EC was not RU-486 and 46% ($n$ = 84) identified 5 days as the time frame for taking EC.

Next, scores for each participant on the pretest and posttest were computed. This was done by scoring each knowledge question as 1 for correct and 0 for incorrect and then creating a total score for each participant. This was done for both the pretest and posttest, which allowed for the computing of a change score for each participant. These scores were compared through analysis of variance (ANOVA) to see if they differed (Dimitrov & Rumrill, 2003). The analysis showed that there were no differences in pretest knowledge between the comparison and experimental groups, $F(1, 272) = .06$, $p = .80$. The next analysis was to check if those in the experimental group had higher knowledge after seeing the EC message. This was accomplished through comparing those in the experimental condition to those in the comparison condition on posttest knowledge. The ANOVA showed a significant difference, with those in the experimental group having higher knowledge scores on the posttest, $F(1, 272) = 45.19$, $p < .001$.

Finally, hierarchical regression was used to test knowledge and condition (experimental/comparison), which were included in the equation with the HBM variables. The amount of variance explained

increased to 67%, $R^2 = .67$, $F(5, 252) = 87.15$, $p < .001$. Knowledge influenced intent to use or purchase EC in the future, $\beta = .20$, $p < .001$, as did condition, $\beta = .16$, $p < .001$. In this regression, the HBM variables were all significant contributors, with benefits and barriers, $\beta = .48$, $p < .001$, severity, $\beta = .13$, $p = .008$, and vulnerability, $\beta = .15$, $p = .003$, adding to the model.

### *Two-Month Follow-Up*

Two months later, all of the participants were contacted to complete the measures. Of the original 274 who completed pretest surveys, 120 (43.8%) completed the 2-month posttest. The experimental condition had 86 participants in the follow-up, whereas the comparison had 34. There were 31 men and 89 women, with most identifying themselves as White (84%). The second highest identified racial category was Asian (12%), and next was African American (3%). The average age was just under 19 years old ($M = 18.9$), and most (70%) reported having had heterosexual intercourse. The score from the posttest for each participant was subtracted from his or her score at the 2-month posttest to create a change score. Prior to running the ANOVA, a check of mean knowledge was conducted, which found that at the initial posttest, the mean score on knowledge was just under nine questions correct ($M = 8.7$) for the experimental group, and 2 months later, it was similar ($M = 8.6$). An ANOVA was run to see if there was a significant change in knowledge and none was found $F(10,75) = 0.77$, $p = .66$. This nonfinding supports Hypothesis 5 that knowledge was maintained.

When looking at what influenced behavioral intention at the 2-month posttest, three variables made significant contributions: severity, benefits and barriers, and knowledge. Together these three variables contributed to predicting 48% of the variance related to intent to use EC, $R^2 = .48$, $F(3, 107) = 33.21$, $p < .001$. This equation changed from the initial posttest, with condition and vulnerability no longer making significant contributions.

## DISCUSSION

If young people are going to have heterosexual intercourse, there is the chance that they will not use protection or that it will fail. In the event of one of these scenarios occurring, they can use EC to prevent an unintended pregnancy. The current study identifies important areas where young people lack essential knowledge related to EC. The pretest results demonstrate that the participants were uninformed about EC, especially that it differed from the abortion pill RU-486. This knowledge gap is important because young people may not be in favor of abortion but might want to avoid getting pregnant, which can be accomplished by taking EC. A study involving 396 college students found that 51% thought that abortion was murder and 52% felt that abortion was immoral (Hess & Rueb, 2005). This factor must be highlighted in any future public health campaign directed at use of EC. If more than half of the population believes that taking EC is the same as having an abortion, then many outside factors, such as religion and family, could influence their decision (Hickey & White, 2015; Johnson et al., 2010). Becoming more knowledgeable about how EC works and that it will not terminate a pregnancy is an important area to target.

Another significant finding is that the participants did not know how much time they had after having sex to take EC. This potentially comes from the misnomer of the "morning-after pill." A 40% increase in correct answers to this question was seen in the experimental condition on the initial posttest. This lack of understanding could seriously increase the number of unintended pregnancies. Any campaign would need to highlight that the sooner a person takes EC, the better odds it has of working, but include that women have 5 days to act.

On top of increasing knowledge in these important areas, a future campaign could be built around the HBM variables of severity, vulnerability, benefits, and barriers, as they contributed significantly

to predicting intent to use EC. These variables accounted for 60% of the variance at posttest. Two other factors that can contribute to a campaign regarding EC are that young people are vulnerable to unintended pregnancy and that it can severely impact their lives. This information could be shared through statistics regarding unintended pregnancy and how having an unintended child could influence their education as well as their relationships. The benefits outweighed the barriers, and this combined benefits–barriers variable had the greatest effect on intention. Having the largest impact indicates that it should be featured in a campaign. This too goes along with increasing knowledge, as individuals were not fully aware of the benefits of EC, such as decreasing chances to have an unintended child and lack of serious side effects. They also were unaware that EC could be purchased at pharmacies and at many university health centers.

Outside of benefits, general knowledge needs to be increased, because it was the second most influential variable as relates to intention. Those who were more informed most likely felt more confident in their understanding of EC and the major differences that exist between it and RU-486.

Almost half of those who participated in the initial pretest and posttest returned to complete the final round of the survey. This follow-up survey was an important factor in understanding whether the participants were able to maintain their knowledge regarding EC over time. If they were not able to retain the information, then the message would not be seen as being effective. Impressively, their overall knowledge related to EC remained relatively stable, as there was no significant change in knowledge. This lack of significant change adds strength to the use of a short, informative message. Although knowledge remained the same, there were a few minor changes that could alter the creation of a campaign message.

Changes were seen in relation to what influenced intent after the 2 months had passed, as vulnerability and condition were

dropped from the regression. Vulnerability is an issue with young people as they feel they are rarely in danger when it comes to their health. As for condition, knowledge took away any potential variance that condition could contribute. This was due to those in the experimental group having greater knowledge than those in the comparison condition because the former group had viewed the informative EC message. The other important findings from the follow-up were that severity, benefits and barriers, and knowledge each had a significant positive effect on intention. These findings could contribute to future campaign design related to the promotion of EC. Findings from the HBM support that campaigns should focus on highlighting the benefits, as these were the most influential in predicting intentions. The next most important aspect would be to increase knowledge regarding EC. As individuals became more aware of how EC worked, they became more likely to say that they would use it if needed.

Increasing knowledge should be a goal of all future EC campaigns, especially because even after 2 months had passed, this information stayed with the participants. The ability to use a brief message to convey important information and have it be maintained by the target population is a strength of the current study. There were no significant differences in the participants who completed the pretest and 2-month follow-up survey compared to those who only completed the pretest. This indicates that all who saw the message likely retained the information related to EC.

### *Limitations*

One limitation of this study was that participants self-selected to be part of the study. The ones who decided to participate may have done so because they had an interest in EC. Another limitation is that the sample was not racially diverse. The overwhelming percentage of White participants prohibits generalizing the results to a larger population. A more diverse and larger population may allow for

a better understanding of how outside factors, such as religion or family values, influence the decision to use EC. Although those who completed all rounds of the survey did not differ on their baseline knowledge from individuals who decided not to finish the survey, there could be something about either of these populations that influenced the results. The participants who fully completed the survey may have had a greater interest in EC than those who opted not to finish all rounds of the survey. Another issue is that over the 2 months between the posttests, participants could have done research on their own related to EC, or they could have seen informative messages that helped them to maintain their knowledge.

### *Future Research*

The current study set out to better understand the knowledge gaps of the college population in regard to EC and confirmed what other researchers have found. College students did not know how long after unprotected sex to use EC, and most did not know that EC is not the same as RU-486, which is known as the abortion pill (Ellertson et al., 2000; Haynes, 2007; Raymond et al., 2009). Their knowledge increased significantly after viewing the EC message, which increased their intent to use EC. The success of a brief message should be tested in future studies, particularly related to use, because measuring actual use may provide greater insight. Another option for future research is to provide the same information to young people through a video to see if they will remember the information at similar rates to the written message. This creates opportunities for public service announcements directed at young people to increase their knowledge and intent related to EC. These messages could be distributed by any organization, local or national, in areas where unintended pregnancy rates are elevated. The study supports that to increase intentions to use EC, the benefits of EC need to be clearly and easily shared with young people who are at the greatest risk for unintended pregnancy and account for a majority of abortions.

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# Memorable Weight Messages: Exploring the Contexts and Components of Messages That Generate Motivation, Anger, or Happiness in Their Recipients

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Research has suggested that romantic partners are the most consequential relationship for our physical health. The current study employs thematic analysis to examine one form of partner communication about weight management: memorable messages. Results suggest that memorable weight management messages emerge from contexts involving social comparison and/or propinquity to an event that makes weight management salient. Furthermore, these messages contain themes of prescription and accolade that produce two-part responses in their recipients: happiness–reassurance, self-consciousness–anger, or self-consciousness–motivation. Implications for health communication scholars as well as supporters of those trying to manage their weight are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** Memorable messages, weight management, thematic analysis, romantic partners, health communication

Romantic partners play an important role in influencing each other's physical and psychological health in a variety of contexts (Cohen & Lichtenstein, 1990; DeBro, Campbell, & Peplau, 1994; Doherty, Schrott, Metcalf, & Iasiello-Vailas, 1983; Markey, Gomel, & Markey, 2008; Pistrang & Barker, 1995). Despite the well-documented influence of romantic relationships on health, and the extended history examining the influence of social bonds on health and

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well-being (Burgess, 1926; Durkheim 1897/1951), little empirical research has investigated the influence of romantic relationships on weight management and body image (Boyes, Fletcher, & Latner, 2007). Even less research has examined how romantic partners *communicate* about issues related to weight management and physical health (Dennis, 2006). This lack of research is unfortunate because the romantic relationship appears to be the one relationship most consequential for physical health (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Pistrang & Barker, 1995; Waltz, Badura, Pfaff, & Schott, 1988).

Approximately two-thirds of adults in the United States are overweight or obese (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden, & Curtin, 2010). The number of individuals who are overweight or obese is troubling, as weight management problems are related to significant medical (see Mokdad et al., 2003; Sarwer, Foster, & Wadden, 2004), psychological (Neumark-Sztainer & Haines, 2004), social (e.g., stigmatization; Brownell, Puhl, Schwartz, & Rudd, 2005; Carr & Friedman, 2006; Gortmaker, Must, Perrin, Sobal, & Dietz, 1993; Sheets & Ajmere, 2005), and financial difficulties (e.g., Koplan & Dietz, 1999; Mokdad et al., 1999; Sturm & Wells, 2001; Wolf & Colditz, 1998). These difficulties are further exacerbated by the compounding nature of weight management struggles, as parents who are overweight tend to raise children who are also overweight (Li, Law, Lo Conte, & Power, 2009) and thus susceptible to the aforementioned difficulties.

Weight management concerns also affect both normal-weight and underweight individuals. Peters, Wyatt, Donahoo, and Hill (2002) argued that without substantial conscious effort to manage their weight, normal-weight individuals are likely to gain weight. Furthermore, eating disorders, including anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating, affect close to 5 million Americans a year (Hudson, Hiripi, Pope, & Kessler, 2007) and are also linked to a number of medical, psychological, and social difficulties (Cachelin & Maher, 1998; Kreipe & Harris, 1992; Levine, 2002; Phillips & Diaz, 1997; Pomeroy, 2004).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The well-documented medical, psychological, and social difficulties associated with weight management have not been ignored, and health campaigns, nonprofit organizations, and commercial weight management programs geared toward addressing weight management have been implemented. However, the strategies employed by weight management programs have experienced limited success (Kahn, Williamson, & Stevens, 1991; Larkey et al., 1990; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2004), particularly pertaining to long-term, sustained weight loss (Jeffery et al., 2000), and may even contribute to weight management difficulties by causing yo-yo dieting and weight regain. One explanation for the limited success weight management programs have experienced is the lack of specificity programs provide about the role of significant others, particularly romantic partners, in their targets' weight management efforts. Thus the purpose of this study is to examine one form of partner communication about weight management: memorable messages.

### *Memorable Messages*

*Memorable messages* are defined as messages that have significance in their recipients' lives (Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981). Memorable messages are characterized by two qualities: First, the individual recalls the message for a long period of time, and second, the individual perceives the message as having an important influence on his or her life (Knapp et al., 1981; Stohl, 1986). Memorable messages provide a useful framework for studying partner weight management messages over other types of messages (e.g., typical messages or most recent messages) as, by their very definition, memorable messages have an impact on recipients and thus may represent the most influential message partners receive about weight management from the most consequential source for their health

(Berkman & Syme, 1979; Pistrang & Barker, 1995; Waltz, Badura, Pfaff, & Schott, 1988).

Romantic relationship partners are a common source of memorable weight management messages (Dailey, Richards, & Romo, 2009). However, the close interpersonal nature of romantic relationships means that partner messages are constrained by multiple concerns. For example, relational partners are typically concerned not only with the success or failure of their message but also about the impact of the communication on the relationship itself (Miller & Boster, 1988). Relationship concerns may be particularly relevant concerning the potentially face-threatening subject of weight management. However, it is precisely the close nature of our relationship with romantic partners that makes their messages so impactful (Markey, Markey, & Gray, 2007). Indeed, communication that holds personal significance for the recipient is remembered more accurately than messages that are perceived as less personal (Keenan, MacWhinney, & Mayhew, 1977).

Using the memorable message framework to study partner weight management messages contributes to this body of research in at least three ways. First, identifying characteristics of the message itself is important to understanding how the actual message influences relational and health outcomes (Ford & Ellis, 1998; Rook, 1990). Second, communication researchers have increasingly recognized the complex outcomes associated with how recipients respond to and interpret messages, including both relational (e.g., Vangelisti, 2001) and health (Thoits, 1995) implications. Third, research has indicated that memorable messages are particularly important because of their socializing function, by which they influence cognitions and behaviors (see Holladay, 2002; Barge & Schleuter, 2004, and references therein). Therefore, to assess the contexts that yield memorable messages, as well as their content, the following research questions were asked:

RQ1: In what contexts do memorable messages about weight management occur from romantic partners?

RQ2: What are the components of memorable messages about weight management from romantic partners?

### *Responses to Memorable Messages*

Central to this study is the process of interpreting and responding to a partner's weight management message. The study of message interpretation in a health context is not new. For example, Goldsmith, Lindholm, and Bute (2006) explored the interpretation of lifestyle change messages by interviewing 25 myocardial infraction and/or coronary artery bypass graft patients as well as 16 of their romantic partners. From these in-depth interviews, Goldsmith et al. noted that couples' communication about health potentially carries multiple and/or conflicting qualities, including potentially positive (e.g., support) and/or less desirable components (e.g., control and criticism). Goldsmith et al. noted that the varied nature of partner messages concerning health can create interpretive dilemmas for partners such that "good intentions do not always translate into positive interpretations" (p. 2088).

Research on health message interpretation has also suggested that how messages are interpreted and responded to is affected by multiple factors, including cultural background (Callister, 1995), individual characteristics and expectations (Lakey & Lutz, 1996; Vinokur, Schul, & Caplan, 1987), message characteristics (e.g., severity of threat; ten Hoor et al., 2012), message content (Robinson, Fleming, & Higgs, 2014), relational characteristics (Byely, Archibald, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Markey et al., 2007; Zeller et al., 2007), and mood (Burleson & Planalp, 2000). Despite the numerous factors affecting how messages are interpreted, exploring how memorable weight management messages are responded to is important, as message interpretation can influence perceptions of the efficacy of health behavior (Knox, Webb, Esliger, Biddle, & Sherar, 2013);

desire to change health behavior (Holladay, 2002); relationship with the message source (e.g., their romantic partner; Holladay, 2002); and health behavior, including food selection (Wagner, Howland, & Mann, 2015). Therefore, to assess how participants respond to memorable weight management messages from their romantic partners, the final research question asks the following:

> RQ3: How do participants respond to memorable messages about weight management from their romantic partners?

## METHOD

### *Participants and Procedures*

A sample of 149 participants (30 men, 115 women, four recorded no responses) currently involved in a romantic relationship that had lasted at least 3 months were surveyed for this study. Participants averaged 20.18 (*SD* = 3.39) years of age and ranged from 18 to 44 years of age. Participants were recruited from several lower- and upper-division communication courses at a large, public university and were offered extra credit points for their participation. The ethnicity of the sample was representative of the university: White/Caucasian (55.70%), Latino/a or Hispanic (12.75%), Asian or Pacific Islander (22.82%), Black or African American (4.70%), and other or multiple ethnicities (1.34%). On average, participants had been in their current romantic relationships for 20.22 months (*Mdn* = 14.00).

A questionnaire was developed using Qualtrics software and posted online for an approximate duration of 1 week. Before filling out the questionnaire, participants were provided with the contact information of the researcher in case of questions, concerns, or interest in the research results. After completing the questionnaire, participants were also provided with a short debriefing statement about the purpose of the study. Most participants took approximately 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

### *Measures*

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section 1 requested demographic information (for both the participant and his or her partner), including age, sex, race/ethnicity, and height and weight (to calculate body mass index [BMI]). In addition, Section 1 queried about basic relationship questions, including relationship duration and relationship status (e.g., casually dating, seriously dating, or married). Section 2 focused on memorable weight management messages and asked participants to report about a memorable weight management message they had received from their romantic partners.

*Body mass index.* Participants' self-reported height and weight were used to calculate BMI (i.e., weight in pounds multiplied by 703 and divided by height squared). In addition, the height and weight statistics reported for their partners were used to calculate their partners' BMIs. Previous research has indicated that self-reports are a valid measure of BMI (e.g., Goodman, Hinden, & Khandelwal, 2000). According to the parameters established by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (1998), 13.88% ($n = 20$) of the sample were underweight, 20.83% ($n = 30$) of the sample were normal weight, 31.25% ($n = 45$) of the sample could be classified as overweight, and 34.03% ($n = 49$) were obese.

*Memorable messages.* Participants were asked to provide a description of a specific memorable message they had received from their romantic partners. Specifically, participants were instructed as follows:

> The section below asks you to describe a memorable weight management message you have received from your current romantic partner. A memorable message refers to any statement by your partner regarding your body size, physique, feelings, and attitudes about your appearance, or comments about the regulation of your weight or body size through diet and exercise.

Participants were then asked to follow the format outlined in previous research (e.g., Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998): (a) describe the situation and what led to the message, (b) provide a script of the interaction, (c) designate the specific message of interest, and (d) describe the response to this memorable message. Previous research has successfully utilized questionnaires in the collection of memorable message data (Holladay, 2002; Holladay & Coombs, 1991; Reno & McNamee, 2015) and found that participants have a high level of certainty regarding the recall of the exact wording of memorable messages (Holladay, 2002).

## DATA ANALYSIS

To capture participant accounts of the context that led to a memorable weight management message, the memorable message components, participant responses, and themes were inductively derived from participants' qualitative data. An inductive approach was utilized so that the themes that emerged would be linked to the data specifically, as opposed to a preexisting template (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was appropriate for the research questions as it allowed for "sense-making at different rates and in different forms fitting the specific concerns of the participants" (Owen, 1984, p. 276). More specifically, this qualitative approach allowed access to the "behaviors, languages, definitions, attitudes, and feelings of those studied" (Denzin, 1971, p. 166).

The identification of themes involved four steps (see Johnson, Orbe, & Cooke-Jackson, 2014; see also Apker, Propp, & Ford, 2005). First, the memorable message context, script, message, and response accounts were copied from the Qualtrics software and pasted into a Microsoft Excel file. Second, the data were read through twice without remark to establish familiarity. Third, the data were reviewed for the expression of similar meaning across participant responses (reoccurrence), and fourth, the data were reviewed to identify the

frequent occurrence of key words and phrases (repetition; see Owen, 1984). A theme was therefore noted when two criteria were met: (a) reoccurrence and (b) repetition (Owen, 1984). Notably, the first criterion involved a more implicit reoccurrence of meaning, whereas the second criterion relied on a more explicit repetition of word(s).

Reoccurrence occurred when at least two sections of response had the same meaning, even in cases where different words indicated that meaning (Owen, 1984). For example, one participant described her response to a memorable weight management message she received from a partner: "It made me feel really good to know that he still notices me." Later on, a participant described how she felt after receiving a memorable message: "So when he saw me recently and noticed my weight loss, it made me extremely self-confident and happy."

The criterion of repetition involved the reiteration of key words, phrases, and terms. For example, one participant described her response to a memorable weight management message she received from a partner: "Anger, self-conscious, shame, embarrassment, self-disgust." Later on, a participant explained her reaction to a weight management message:

> My first reaction was *anger*. I felt betrayed—why hadn't he said something? Next, I felt *shame*—like I'd suddenly become an *embarrassment* to my husband. Then I was mad at myself. I tend to be seasonally active; my weight has always fluctuated through these transitions. However, I'd become lazy lately and knew it, thus, *the self-disgust/self-consciousness*.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis yielded two themes regarding the context in which memorable weight management messages are communicated: social comparison and propinquity. The process additionally

revealed two themes, prescription and accolade, that describe memorable message content, and three themes, happiness–reassurance, self-consciousness–anger, and self-consciousness–motivation, that capture participant responses to the receipt of a memorable weight management message from their romantic partners. These themes are central concepts in participants' written accounts, as illustrated in the examples of actual participant accounts included in the following pages.

### *Context Features*

*Social comparison.* The theme of social comparison was both explicitly and implicitly referred to throughout participant accounts of the contexts in which memorable weight management messages occurred. Often, social comparison served as a genesis or starting point for conversations about weight management. Put another way, comparison to another individual served as the impetus for the memorable weight management messages many participants received from their partners. As one participant described, "we were going to dinner and passed the gym on the way—because we passed the gym, we saw several people coming in and out of it. While some individuals were overweight, most of them (who were especially girls that day) were all very, very in shape and had great bodies." Another explained, "My boyfriend and I had gone out drinking with some of my friends and we were driving home in his car afterwards. We started talking about my female friend who is four to five inches shorter than I am, but weighs about the same amount."

In some instances, social comparison generated favorable comparisons: "Him: 'Wow, look at that girl.' Me: 'Aww, that's sad. She's so young and so overweight.' Him: 'I'm so glad you're in great shape.'" For others, social comparison led to an unfavorable comparison:

> I saw this one girl who I thought was gorgeous and I loved her body, so I turned to my boyfriend and said, "Oh, my gosh, I

> would give anything to have that body . . . she is so lucky! I can't stand my thighs!" My boyfriend looks at me with a smirk on his face and goes, "Yeah, she has a really nice body. You, on the other hand . . . ," and starts laughing.

Still for others, social comparison had neither a favorable or unfavorable valence; instead, it was perceived as a motivating factor leading up to the delivery of the memorable weight management message. Specifically, participants reported that social comparison provided the impetus for messages from their partners that ultimately encouraged them to maintain or engage in weight management efforts. One participant stated, "The sight of people working out caught our attention. We admired their determination to work out." Another participant noted, "Honestly, I was happy that she came out and said it. She has almost given me motivation to get back into shape."

Social comparison as a contextual cue leading to a memorable weight management message is consistent with the tenets of social comparison theory (SCT; Festinger, 1954). SCT holds that individuals are driven to evaluate themselves and that evaluation occurs through comparison to similar others on items individuals perceive as important. Furthermore, this evaluation provides normative and behavioral guidance. The participants in the current study were reporting on messages they had received from their romantic partners, and thus physical desirability, and its associations with weight management, may hold particular importance for this population. This emerged from the data in two ways.

First, participant accounts of the contexts leading to a weight management message reflected assessment of their own weight management and associated efforts against reference group members. Often, this would involve a participant evaluating his or her own physical appearance in regard to weight and/or weight management efforts against another person, with the valence of

the participant's evaluation prompting a response—in the form of a memorable weight management message—from his or her partner. One participant stated,

> One day, we were leaving his parents' house and they were saying how his sister had gained weight. She is a twig and their whole family are health fanatics and are all naturally skinny. I only wish I could look that good. Last time I ever looked that skinny was eighth grade. I started feeling really insecure about myself and started crying. I found myself sneaking to get Dairy Queen with him at midnight after the rest of the family had gone to bed.

A second way that social comparison emerged in the data was in the form of one partner comparing the other partner to others in their physical or psychological proximity (e.g., a film character). One participant described, "We went to the movies to go see *Hancock* and Priscilla was admiring Will Smith's body in the movie." Another participant noted, "We were walking in the mall and we passed a thin young woman. He told me, 'I'm glad you're not that thin. I like you just the way you are. You're perfect.'"

***Propinquity.*** The theme of propinquity was repeatedly featured in participant descriptions of the contexts in which they received memorable weight management messages. For many of the participants, propinquity yielded a memorable message in one of two ways: physical or event propinquity. Physical proximity to a gym or workout facility often provided context for a memorable weight management message for study participants. One participant described the context that led to a memorable message in the following way: "We were at the gym working out in the evening. I was on the bench press." Another stated simply, "We were driving by a 24 Hour Fitness." For other participants, physical proximity to a sporting event or activity provided the context for a memorable message. One participant reported, "We were playing tennis, and

after the tennis match we were talking about my exercise habits, which include running and calisthenics."

A second means by which propinquity led to a memorable weight message was in terms of chronemic proximity to a specific event (e.g., spring break or a formal event such as a wedding). For participants in this study, an upcoming event, and associated preparation activities, yielded an apt context for a memorable weight management message. One participant explained, "We were at the mall one day two or three weeks ago. We both were shopping so I could find a pair of jeans and a dress for an upcoming event I was invited to. I was complaining how jeans are always too tight on my hips and to lose on my thighs while I had tried them (discouragingly) on." Another participant stated, "We were going to a formal and he saw me in my tight-fitting dress," and another stated, "We were shopping in the mall and I was buying a swimsuit for spring break."

Memorable message sources' use of propinquity when communicating with partners about weight management may be understood through the lens of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Politeness theory is founded on principles and strategies for maintaining and enhancing interactants' face (i.e., public self-image) during a social encounter. Given that communication between romantic partners is often constrained by relational concerns in addition to concerns about message goal achievement, linguistic politeness may be used as a strategy for reducing interpersonal friction and for facilitating smooth interactions (Lakoff, 1973). Linguistic politeness may be particularly apropos given the potentially face-threatening topic of weight management and weight management efforts.

More specifically, message sources may utilize the contextual feature of propinquity (physical or chronemic) to activities and events associated with weight management to avoid communicating in a direct, bald-on-record manner with a partner about weight management. In other words, proximity to weight management

locations, activities, and events made a message about weight management seem less direct and thus less likely to pose a face threat to the recipient and, by extension, disrupt the relationship.

### *Message Themes*

Once the contexts of memorable weight management messages had been investigated, the actual content of the messages was examined. The analysis of the message content yielded two themes: prescription and accolade. Prescription and accolade were central to the scripts of participant memorable messages.

*Prescription.* For many of the participants, memorable messages were characterized by prescriptive statements that were often coupled with invitations to engage in weight management behaviors with the message source. Prescriptive messages involved suggestions or recommendations on advised weight management behaviors, including modifying food consumption behavior ("He asked if I had gone on a run before dinner at the diner and said that would be one of the few excuses that would be acceptable to order so much fatty foods"), exercise behavior ("You really need to start working out again, babe, you're being lazy"), and time spent in leisure ("Me: 'Yeah, I agree it is important to be healthy, but I just can't get around to working out every day, between school and work I am just too busy.' Guy I am dating: 'Well, people have different priorities that show later.'").

Prescriptive memorable messages also involved invitations to join the message source in weight management activities. Often, this was an invitation to engage in exercise behavior that also included additional offers by the message source to instruct or help the message recipient with his or her exercise behavior, as in one participant's memorable message: "Yeah, you should totally work out. . . . I'll help you and show you some things to do." Other times, the memorable message simply contained a recommended behavior for the recipient: "You're skinny, but you need to be lifting weights

and playing tennis rather than running, and eating healthier if you want to get toned."

***Accolade.*** Many memorable messages about weight management contained prescriptive components; however, analysis of memorable messages also revealed a theme of accolade, often in the form of compliments or reassurances. Memorable messages that were complimentary contained statements praising physical characteristics or weight management behaviors (e.g., food selection and exercise behaviors). Rooted in the accolade theme was a temporal aspect, such that memorable messages included compliments pertaining to previous physical characteristics, for example, "The first thing that drew me to you, before I really saw you, was your legs," through current physical attributes, for example, "He then told me that he liked hugging me because I felt so tiny," and leading up to future physical potential, for example, "You should start doing CrossFit, it could shape you up really good."

A small subset of memorable messages contained complimentary elements blended with negative comments or simultaneously "face-enhancing and face-aggravating statements," referred to as *backhanded compliments* (Archer, 2015, p. 92). For participants in this research, backhanded compliments ranged from simple evaluations of physical appearance, for example, "Wow, you're actually pretty skinny!" to statements regarding weight management behavior, for example, "You ALWAYS order salads!" Another participant described the memorable message she received, as well as her response, as follows:

SCRIPT: We were snuggling and cuddled close to each other with minimal clothing on. I am in shape, but curvy. He told me I am "voluptuous." He also called me "big mama." He said his roommate calls his girlfriend "big mama," so it's OK.

RESPONSE: I was ANGRY! I am a very confident person and usually get positive remarks regarding my looks. Despite that fact, I still

> get insecure and wish I could lose about 5–10 pounds. Especially around my middle. When he called me voluptuous, I was annoyed but quickly got over it because he assured me that he meant it in the most positive way. When he called me "big mama," I was seriously offended and my feelings were hurt. I immediately felt unattractive and embarrassed. He told me his roommate calls his own girlfriend (who is attractive) "big mama" as well. This did not make me feel better. Now I am really self-conscious.

As is consistent with previous research on backhanded compliments (see Archer, 2015), research participants struggled with interpreting these messages because they were unsure whether the message was meant to be an admonishment or a commendation. Put another way, the combination of praise and put-down found in a subset of the reported memorable messages created an interpretive dilemma for participants.

For other participants, messages were memorable that included accolades in the form of reassurances. Typically, these messages were designed to reassure the participant about his or her physical desirability: "Why are you worried about your body? I think it's perfect the way it is. I won't love you anymore if you change yourself." However, for some participants, reassurances were geared toward assuring the recipient that his or her weight management efforts were effective: "He said, 'Wow, baby, you've lost a lot of weight! I can really tell the difference from the last time I saw you.' I said, 'Well, I've been working out with a trainer and I've been eating better. I just really want to get back to how I looked in high school.' He said, 'Well, it's definitely working!'" Another participant recorded, "He noticed that I had lost a little bit of weight and he said, 'You look really good, I know you've been working hard.'"

Identifying the components of a message is important to understanding how the actual message influences relational and health outcomes (Ford & Ellis, 1998; Rook, 1990). The memorable weight

management messages reported in this research contained prescriptive and complimentary elements. These dichotomized findings concerning the content of memorable weight management messages coalesce with research applying confirmation theory (Buber, 1965; Sieburg, 1985) to weight management contexts (Dailey, McCracken, & Romo, 2011). Specifically, Dailey et al. found that messages that are high in both acceptance and challenge are perceived as most effective. Thus it may be that memorable messages would be more effective in motivating weight management behavior if they combined complimentary (acceptance) and prescriptive (challenge) aspects into one message.

### *Response Themes*

Participant accounts of their responses to memorable weight management messages reflected three themes. Interestingly, participants reported responding to memorable weight management messages from their romantic partners as part of a two-part sequence, thus the themes: (a) happiness–reassurance, (b) self-consciousness—anger, and (c) self-consciousness—motivation.

*Happiness–reassurance.* For many participants, the memorable messages they received generated a positive initial response followed by a feeling of comfort or reassurance in their physical appearance and/or their relationship. One participant explained, “It made me feel really good to know that he still notices me. When I was a heavier weight, I always felt like he never complimented me and I felt ugly to him. So when he saw me recently and noticed my weight loss, it made me extremely self-confident and happy.” Another participant noted, “It made me feel confident and great about myself. It also made me feel comfortable with myself and the fact that he liked my body.” Another participant discussed how the message reassured her that her relationship with her partner was strong:

> It made me feel good that he supported me. I felt deep down that I wished he was a little bigger but I was just so happy that he accepts every part of me and no matter what I look like even though I'm so intimidated by everyone else. And it made me realize that I love him no matter what and accept him as he is.

*Self-consciousness—anger versus self-consciousness—motivation.* Many participants described feeling self-conscious as a result of their reported memorable messages. This self-consciousness stemmed simply from the issue of weight management being brought up or a feeling that they were not meeting their own or their partners' weight preferences. While many participants reported an immediate feeling of self-consciousness in response to a memorable message they received, this response was described as part of a sequence that involved two distinct secondary responses: anger and motivation.

*Anger.* For the majority of participants, self-consciousness was followed by a feeling of anger, as one participants explained: "I felt embarrassed and mad at myself (and a little at him) for having 'let myself go.'" Anger often functioned as a manifestation of guilt. More specifically, when participants held a preexisting sense of guilt or self-consciousness about a weight management behavior, they tended to report a response of anger to their received memorable message. For some, this occurred when the recipient was engaging in unhealthy eating behaviors or avoiding exercise behaviors; the recipients reported being aware that their behaviors were unhealthy and feeling guilty or self-conscious about the behavior: "I was talking about how much I had eaten that weekend and how I missed my dance classes in Spain because I noticed that my body felt different and I felt like I was gaining weight." In these instances, additional messages from their partners reinforced feelings of guilt, and recipients reported responding to this with anger. Notably, their anger was directed toward the message source as well as toward themselves, as the following participant response illustrates:

> Anger, self-conscious, shame, embarrassment, self-disgust. . . . My father-in-law might be outrageous, but he'd never been mean. As for my husband, he had always brushed off my concerns about weight gain over the years (although I have to admit that I'd never gained so much before), so his silence told me without words that he agreed with his father. My first reaction was anger. I felt betrayed—why hadn't he said something? Next, I felt shame—like I'd suddenly become an embarrassment to my husband. Then I was mad at myself. I tend to be seasonally active; my weight has always fluctuated through these transitions. However, I'd become lazy lately and knew it, thus the self-disgust/self-consciousness.

Some participants reported feeling angry after receiving a memorable weight management message from their partners due to the messages' critical content. One participant reported the memorable message he had received as follows: "Oh, no! Your stomach is so big!" Other participants reported responding to the memorable message with anger because the message involved a negative evaluation, either to another physically fit person or to previous weight management behaviors in which the participant had engaged. As one participant described,

> I saw this one girl who I thought was gorgeous and I loved her body, so I turned to my boyfriend and said, "Oh, my gosh, I would give anything to have that body . . . she is so lucky! I can't stand my thighs!" My boyfriend looks at me with a smirk on his face and goes, "Yeah, she has a really nice body. You, on the other hand . . . ," and starts laughing.

For other participants, the message yielded anger because it involved a negative evaluation of weight management behaviors in which they had previously engaged, as one participant described:

A: Urghh, I hate how pants are always tight on my hips and loose on my thighs. Look, the bulges. I can't even button it!
B: Yeah, well, maybe you should do some more crunches again like you used to all the time. I mean, if it bothers you.
A, *irritated*: Thanks. Yeah, sure.

For participants in this research, messages that contained criticism and negative comparison yielded an angry response in message recipients, likely because the criticism and negative comparison implied that the recipient was lacking in some way. Pertaining to health attitude, this is problematic, as research has suggested that support from significant others may be of particular importance in weight management contexts (Rieder & Ruderman, 2007). Put another way, many social activities involve eating and food preparation, thus without perceived network support, recipients may feel as though they are missing out on social opportunities when engaging in certain weight management behaviors such as dietary restrictions. Researchers have also noted that long-term weight management requires lifelong behavioral changes and that individuals may need more than their own personal resources to maintain these changes (Rieder & Ruderman, 2007).

*Motivation.* For other participants, a response of self-consciousness was coupled with motivation to engage in weight management behavior: "I felt like the hard work I have been doing was finally paying off but that I wanted to get even bigger so more people would recognize my size."

These participants reported a motivation response because they interpreted the message as reassuring and encouraging. Put another way, these participants felt motivated to engage in weight management behaviors because their partners' messages reassured them about their appearance and/or the relationship and also encouraged them to engage in weight management behaviors. One participant reported, "My boyfriend then said, 'Trust me, I would tell you if you

were getting fat, you look fine, but working out is healthy and you should do it more often.'" Explanation for this motivation response comes again from research on confirmation theory (Buber, 1965; Sieburg, 1985) in the context of weight management (Dailey et al., 2011). The research results of Dailey et al. indicated that messages that are high in both acceptance and challenge are perceived as most effective. Thus it may be that participants felt motivated to engage in weight management behavior due to the combination of reassurance (acceptance) and encouragement (challenge) in their reported messages.

The current research analyzed the contexts from which memorable messages emerge, memorable message content, and recipient responses. Results suggest that memorable messages emerge from specific contexts that make weight management salient for the message source. The research suggests that these messages contain themes of prescription and accolade pertaining to the message recipients' weight management behavior and physical appearance. Additionally, analysis of recipient responses to memorable weight management messages suggests a two-part reaction of either happiness–reassurance, self-consciousness–anger, or self-consciousness–motivation and that there are specific contexts for and features to messages that generate anger versus messages that motivate weight management behavior.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS

As is true of any research, there are limitations that should be considered in evaluating this research. Some of these pertain to the study's sample characteristics. The sample was predominantly female (77%), young adult ($M = 20.18$, $SD = 3.39$), and largely heterosexual (approximately 98%). Thus the data largely represent young-adult female interpretations of messages from men. This is notable, as supportive messages generated by men and women tend to exhibit

different characteristics, which may be associated with their likelihood of being interpreted as negatively controlling. For example, research has suggested that women, when compared to men, tend to employ a wider repertoire of strategies to manage a partner's weight as well as a higher degree of facilitative behavior (Tucker & Mueller, 2000). These message characteristics may lend themselves to a more benevolent interpretation (e.g., supportive as opposed to negatively controlling). Additionally, weight management messages may have a greater impact among the current young-adult sample as opposed to an older population (see Wirth, James, Fafard, & Ochipa, 2014). Future research regarding the interpretation of supportive messages as controlling with a more balanced sample would help validate the generalizability of this study's findings, as would future research regarding this interpretation process among older and/or homosexual populations.

Other limitations and future research directions concern the study design. This study assessed only one participant's interpretation of messages. Including both partners in future research would be beneficial, as dyadic-level data would allow for a direct comparison of the partners' perspectives. Also concerning this study's design, this research was cross-sectional in nature. Although this design allowed the goals of the study to be reached, research that utilizes a longitudinal design would be better able to capture the long-term responses to and effects of memorable weight messages.

Finally, the distinction between memorable messages that motivate versus those that produce anger warrants further inquiry. Memorable messages have been found to influence cognitions and behaviors in previous research (Barge & Schleuter, 2004), and thus it would be useful for future research to further investigate source, receiver, relational history, health attitude, and message features of memorable messages that generate motivation responses in participants.

## CONCLUSION

Romantic partners play an important role in influencing each other's weight management behaviors. However, little research has examined how romantic partners *communicate* about issues related to weight management and physical health (Dennis, 2006). This research examined one type of weight management message that recipients identified as having a long-term impact: memorable messages. Specifically, this research identified key themes of the contexts that yield these messages, their major components, and the responses they elicit in recipients. Identifying the major context and content themes of memorable weight management messages has helped to illuminate how the actual messages influence relational and health outcomes (Barge & Schleuter, 2004; Ford & Ellis, 1998; Rook, 1990). Furthermore, this study's identification of themes in recipient responses to memorable weight management messages may help communication researchers recognize the complex outcomes associated with how recipients respond to and interpret messages, including the relational (e.g., Vangelisti, 2001), health-related (Thoits, 1995), and health attitude implications.

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# Using Communication Studies to Be an Agent of Change: Keynote Address for the Northwest Communication Association Annual Conference 2014

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Communication studies scholars are perfectly poised to be agents of change. The purpose of this address is to illustrate ways in which tragic events or even a desire to help others in some way can inspire change. This talk features experiences of the speaker where she was able to turn seemingly tragic events into something more meaningful for the community. Specifically, the speaker offers ways in which those at the college level—students, faculty, and staff—can all become agents of change in small and larger ways.

**KEYWORDS:** Communication studies, theoretical application, autoethnography, change agent, keynote address

First of all, thank you so much for asking me to come and be here with you today. I am honored to have been asked and even more to be able to talk about something so near and dear to my heart. When considering what to talk about today, I had to look back at some of the experiences I have had as well as how I have managed to make them about more than just me. Have you ever had an experience where you could have just given up on some part of your life or yourself? I have too. I find there is almost always a way to reframe experiences to make them better—and not just for me, but for others too.

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Today I will tell you about my experience of being assaulted while working as a flight attendant and how it landed me in front of Congress; I will tell you how I took a teaching job, was given a simple duty, and turned it into something bigger than I could have imagined; and I will tell you how I am incorporating service learning into my classes to make the class, experience, and community more meaningful for everyone involved.

## TESTIFYING BEFORE CONGRESS

I went to college but had no idea what I wanted to do there. I was a first-generation college student and was lost and lacking in the skill of successfully going to classes and completing them. After a year, I decided to try something else, and I dropped out to follow a dream to see the world for free. I became a flight attendant for American Airlines. After 3 years of flying, I experienced a life-changing event when a passenger assaulted me on the plane during a flight from Cleveland to Chicago. We were running late, most passengers were attempting to connect to another flight that evening, and so no one noticed that one passenger was incredibly intoxicated when they were herded onto the plane. It didn't take long to figure it out, though, when the passenger kept making inappropriate comments to those around him. I alerted the pilots of the situation and figured we would just land and get rid of him.

Upon descent for landing, the passenger stumbled to the back of the plane where I was seated on the jump seat and yelled at me. I held my hands out to hold him back, but he flailed his arms to get past me, hitting me in the process, and he sat on the floor in front of the aircraft door. He told me that there was a man in the front of the plane with a gun and a bomb and that he was there to protect me. I told him there was no such thing and asked him to get back into a seat. He grew more upset and told me he would watch me die because I didn't believe him. I phoned the captain but was

told we could not land with him on the floor, and I felt the plane rise back up higher in the sky. After much pleading with the man to get into a seat, my hopes were raised when he crawled toward the back row of seats.

My hope of him getting into a seat was diminished when he squeezed into a space typically reserved for a closet. He screamed to the other passengers on the plane that we were about to land in the water, but if they could swim, they would be OK, and that they just needed to break open the windows of the plane. I reassured the passengers that we were not landing in the water. There was a man sitting in the last row of seats adjacent to where the drunk passenger was, and he moved over to the window seat so I was able to get the drunk passenger into the aisle seat. Once his seat belt was on and we were ready to land, I saw him take out a bottle of alcohol and offer it to the man next to him—this explained some of the behavior.

I alerted the captain that the passenger was seated and we were ready to land again. I was thankful when I felt the wheels hit the ground and we taxied to the gate. As we got closer, I stood up to get my coat out of the overhead bin over the drunk passenger's seat. I reached up to pull out my coat, and the man grabbed me by my waist and pulled me on top of him in the seat. I lost my balance and fell up against him, which is when he started kicking, hitting, and punching me. I pushed back and fell back into the aisle. He tried to grab me again, but his seat belt held him in his seat, and he couldn't reach me.

Once I regained my footing, I ran back to the phone and called the captain again. I told him we needed security right away and that I needed help because the man was violent. The first officer offered to come back, and as I hung up the phone, I turned to see the passenger standing right there. He grabbed me by the neck and shook me violently as he told me he loved me and asked me to forgive him because he couldn't control his hands. I saw the first

officer coming out of the cockpit door and told the man that the pilot was coming. He dropped his hands, turned around, and went back to his seat and sat down. The first officer called the captain and recounted what he had just seen and reiterated that we needed security right away. He had to hang up the phone early, though, because the man was on the move through the cabin yelling for the women to stand up and be accounted for.

We were on the ground for 20 minutes before security showed up at the plane. The call for security had been made while we were still in flight, but no one seemed to find it urgent enough to follow through. Once security arrived—who are actually police officers from the O'Hare Police Department at the airport—they removed the passenger from the plane. I deplaned the rest of the passengers, and I was escorted to the police station to give a statement. Once off the plane, I started shaking—shaking that lasted for days.

I was informed that any time the door on the aircraft is closed, any crime or assault committed is considered a federal offense. At 1:00 A.M., the police called an FBI agent who spoke with me briefly and asked me to meet him in his office at O'Hare the next morning at 9:00 A.M. I was then escorted home. To say I had a long, sleepless night would be an understatement.

The next morning, I was getting ready to meet with the FBI when I received a phone call from my supervisor, who said she had heard about the incident and asked where my paperwork was. Not one question about my well-being; she was only interested in paperwork. I informed her that I would be going to meet with the FBI and then would be by to fill out paperwork.

That was the beginning of a terrible experience of working for a company that never did anything to help me despite the trauma I had experienced while working for them. I did my job, I handled the situation as well as I could, but I had no training for what had happened. When I was trained, we were told to give free drinks to disgruntled passengers, and if they were still upset, we

should give them another one. In case you don't know, one drink at 35,000 is equivalent to three at ground level—so probably not the best advice.

I went on a leave of absence for a while and tried twice to go back to flying, only to finally accept that it was time to end that chapter of my life. As soon as I quit, I was contacted by the International Flight Attendant Union and asked if I would testify before Congress about my incident in an attempt to change the way things are done across the board for all airlines. I was told that what had happened to me was one of the worst documented cases of assault in airline history, and because I no longer worked for the airline, I didn't have to follow the whistle-blower rule.

In June 1998, I testified along with another flight attendant, who had had a terrible passenger experience, and the captain of the FAA. We asked Congress to mandate changes in the policies and procedures for airlines to help keep situations like ours from happening again. After my testimony, I was interviewed and featured on ABC, NBC, CBS, MSNBC, CNN, C-SPAN, *Nightline*, and *Good Morning America*, to name a few, as well as in many newspapers and magazines.

After my testimony, airlines changed how they handled their training, and their policies and procedures changed as well. My story is still recirculated on occasion—it was featured in a case study book published last year. I didn't know how much that testimony would help, I didn't know that I could do something like that, but I knew I had to do something. That job and my experience are what led me to the Communication Studies department.

## COLLEGES AGAINST CANCER

When I quit flying, I went back home and tried to pick up the pieces of my failed career aspirations and go back to college. When I went back to campus, I had a better direction of what I could do—I

had a voice and I could help others. I went to the Communication Studies department and said, "I can do this! Will you take me?"

I was welcomed with open arms. I completed my degree, and after being out of my bachelor's program for a few months, I was contacted by the chair of the department who asked me to consider grad school. I was offered an assistantship and taught in exchange for tuition. It allowed me an opportunity to try something new, something I fell in love with.

Following grad school, I was offered a 4-year fixed term position. After being hired, I went to my obligatory meeting with my dean. When I met with her, she explained how the job worked—how many classes I would teach, what I would teach, obligations of the job, and so on. She explained that I would be assessed each year based on five criteria: service to students, service to the department, service to the college, participation in the field (conferences or publication), and service to my community. Then she said, "Service to the community does not mean singing with the choir." Fair enough. I went back to my office and considered all of the ways in which I could do something in my community—that didn't involve singing with a choir. I considered the organizations I had heard about—a few local nonprofits came to mind.

Then I thought about how my family had been riddled with cancer. My family has one particular kind of cancer, and it has been passed genetically to the vast majority of the members. When I was in my early 20s, my sister and I had genetic testing to see if we had the gene. The news was bittersweet. I don't have the cancer gene, but my little sister does. My grandmother was the critical piece of the genetic testing, as we used her DNA to test from. We knew we could because she was battling the cancer at the time. I have spent an unbelievable amount of time in hospitals over the years that, for a well person who "isn't that kind of doctor," is quite astounding. Needless to say, the feeling of knowing you won't get this type of cancer but watching all of your closest family

members suffer from it really sucks. Sitting next to hospital beds was my specialty for many years, and then in this moment of trying to figure out how to serve my community, I knew I could do something more than that.

I went on the American Cancer Society website, and after poking around for a bit, I found a page about something called Colleges Against Cancer. Well, this sounded right up my alley! I called the American Cancer Society and was excited to learn about a new program they were launching at colleges and universities where college students were helping with cancer awareness and prevention education and also holding fund-raising events for cancer research (such as for breast cancer or skin cancer) and the biggest fund-raiser, called the Relay for Life.

After a few conversations, the American Cancer Society agreed to let me start a chapter of Colleges Against Cancer on my campus. I had been assigned to be the advisor for Lambda Pi Eta and the Communication Club, so I pitched the idea to them. To my extreme pleasure, the students were really excited to help get the organization off the ground. Despite the American Cancer Society representative trying very hard to dissuade us from planning a Relay for Life in our first year as a new chapter of Colleges Against Cancer, the students and I fought for the ability to have this event at the end of the year. We had our work cut out for us.

The students learned how to get others involved; they went to other classes and gave persuasive speeches to get more members. It didn't take long before we went from 10 students to more than 30, then more than 50, then more than 100. As we started to plan our first Relay for Life, students took on leadership positions in areas of event planning, donation seeking, and advocacy; someone was co-chair of the event with me, we had a secretary—we had to do everything from planning the events of the night to asking for donations from area businesses, advertising the event, and working with the local hospital and clinic to ask cancer patients and survivors

to come to the event so we could celebrate them and their fight. Our first event had 15 teams of students who had raised funds to be there and do their part to help fight cancer.

The Relay for Life is an overnight event where those in attendance raise funds to donate to the American Cancer Society. The event has teams walking all night long to signify the fight against cancer—someone from your team is walking around the track at all times of the night. The track is lined with lighted luminaria bags decorated in memory of someone who has passed from cancer or in honor of someone who is fighting or has beaten cancer. The moment the bags are lit is intense, and everyone who is brought together for this goal of eradicating cancer realizes the impact of disease on those in the room. It is incredible. The night picks up later with fun games, food, and music. I am so proud to say that in the 4 years I co-chaired the event and advised the student members of Colleges Against Cancer, we raised more than $125,000 for the American Cancer Society, and the organization is still going strong on that campus, even though I am not there any longer.

You see, when I was asked to consider what I could do for my community, I didn't just think about myself and my own experience of putting in some hours volunteering somewhere. I considered the students, the faculty, the staff, and everyone in the community. I was so excited that the students had the experience of going into the community but also for having the community come to us. It became this amazing experience of service learning—the students were giving speeches in their community—both on campus and off. They were advertising the event on the local television and radio stations. They were going into local businesses and asking for donations for an event they felt passionately about helping. They worked with and on teams to make and achieve goals. We were all working to help people who were affected by cancer, both those we knew and those we didn't know.

## PROJECTS IN CLASS

Today I am on a new campus, and I work with students each semester to make their learning experience more than just what we discuss in the classroom or the information in the textbook. I find that most students will admit that they learn best by doing through application. It makes sense, and yet many professors don't ask students to enact what they learn beyond a few assignments, papers, and even teaching to the test.

*Service learning* has been a buzzword for the last few years. Considering doing something with service learning and an event as big as Relay for Life can seem overwhelming for anyone, especially if you have never done it before. Making connections with the community can be difficult, finding someone who will allow the students to come in for a short time and not cause trouble for anyone. I attempted to start a Colleges Against Cancer organization on my new campus without much luck—it's a 2-year, inner-city school that has limited campus hours, a tricky demographic to work with on something that needs time and dedication to nurture and grow.

In wanting to do something on a smaller scale, I created a group assignment where I asked individual students to research a local nonprofit of their choice. They find out what the organization is, who they serve, their mission, vision, what volunteer opportunities exist there. They do this through the website of the company and by interviewing someone who works with the volunteers. Once they have their information, they come back to their group, and each student presents their findings. The group then chooses which organization their group will volunteer with. I give them 1 week off of class in exchange for their volunteer time—when they actually do the volunteering doesn't matter, but the exchange is necessary for my students. Once they have the experience of volunteering for the organization, they create a persuasive speech in which they present the information that was initially researched about the company

along with the experience they had volunteering there. They try to convince the rest of the class to volunteer with the organization in the same position they had or perhaps in a different one that they thought may have been a better placement. I have had hundreds of students do this assignment over the years.

What happens next is always wonderfully surprising to me. Many of my students continue on with the organizations that were presented in class—some stay with the one they worked with, others go and volunteer for one someone else presented on. They report that this is a rich and useful experience, one that changes not just their experience in my class but also their college career. They get experience with volunteering, they know how to approach organizations and offer to help, and they know how to find organizations that speak to their interests in how to help others: Some students continue on and get jobs working with the organizations. I have had six students over the years who have gone on to work with the American Cancer Society and many who have gone on to work with other nonprofits in the Minneapolis area.

## CONCLUSION

So why did I tell you all of these stories today? As communication studies scholars, we are perfectly poised to be agents of change. There are different levels of work toward change, different drives for what we do—we are all different—but we all have what it takes. Although it can sometimes seem impossible to make sense out of senseless situations or events in your life, know that you can rewrite the story and the ending. And maybe you can help others in the process. What did you learn along the way, and how can you use it to help others?

Professors, instructors, teachers, consider how you can engage students in new and exciting ways that go beyond your classroom. Students, when you go to classes, realize that there is something to

be gained from them beyond what to study for the upcoming test. You don't have to wait for direction. Find something that you are interested in and start something grassroots.

You have what it takes to start a community initiative on your campus. This is the time of your life when you have a huge network of fellow classmates, faculty, and staff who just might have similar interests as you. Use your communication studies degrees, positions, and abilities to be agents of change. Find something you are passionate about, and get involved. I leave you with a question: How can you provide service to your community that is more than just singing with the choir?