



8-2018

## Stranger Harassment and PTSD Symptoms: Roles of Self-blame, Shame, Fear, Feminine Norms and Feminism

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Rachel Francesca Carretta entitled "Stranger Harassment and PTSD Symptoms: Roles of Self-blame, Shame, Fear, Feminine Norms and Feminism." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Psychology.

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

**Stranger Harassment and PTSD Symptoms: Roles of Self-blame, Shame, Fear, Feminine Norms and Feminism**

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Rachel Francesca Carretta  
August 2018

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## **Dedication**

To all women who have been made to feel small.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am so thankful for the guidance and encouragement of my advisor and thesis chair, Dawn Szymanski. She has been a fantastic and patient mentor as well as my biggest cheerleader. Thank you to my friends for their kindness and warmth, and to my parents, for continuously providing me with their support.

## Abstract

We examined the relation between experiences of stranger/street harassment and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms among 367 young adult women. We also examined novel explanatory (i.e., self-blame, shame, and fear of rape), risk (adherence to traditional feminine norms of sweet and nice and sexual fidelity), and resiliency (feminist identification) factors in predicting PTSD symptoms via a moderated mediation model. We found that stranger harassment was both directly and indirectly (via more self-blame, greater shame, and more fear of rape) related to more PTSD symptoms. In addition, we found that the direct effect of stranger harassment on shame and the conditional indirect effect of stranger harassment on PTSD symptoms were contingent on sexual fidelity such that these relations were stronger among women with high levels of sexual fidelity. Furthermore, the direct effect of stranger harassment on self-blame and the conditional indirect effect of stranger harassment on PTSD symptoms were contingent on feminist identification such that these relations were stronger among women with low levels of feminist identification. Our results underscore the potential negative impact of stranger harassment experiences on women's mental health and the importance of targeting self-blame, shame, fear, and gender-related norms and attitudes in intervention strategies.

*Keywords:* sexual harassment, trauma, self-blame, shame, fear

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In the past two decades, significant evidence from multiple studies has indicated a link between women's experiences of sexual harassment and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms (Avina & O'Donohue, 2002; Dansky & Kilpatrick, 1997; Ho, Dinh, Bellefontaine, & Irving, 2012; Larsen & Fitzgerald, 2010; Palmieri & Fitzgerald, 2005; Rosenthal, Smidt & Freyd, 2016; Stockdale, Logan, & Weston, 2009; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007). However, this research has largely examined sexual harassment in the workplace/academic settings and no research has investigated the link between women's experiences of stranger harassment (e.g., experiences of unsolicited sexual attention from strangers in public) and PTSD symptoms. To address this gap, we examined the relation between stranger harassment and women's PTSD symptoms. In addition, we examined potential mediators (self-blame, shame, fear of rape) and moderators (feminine norms, feminist identification) in these links via a moderated mediation model (see Figure 1).

### Stranger Harassment

Stranger harassment, also referred to as street harassment, is a pervasive experience for women in the United States (U.S.). Using a nationally representative sample, Kearl (2014) found that 65% of women reported experiencing stranger harassment in their lifetimes, with 86% reporting being harassed more than once. In addition, more than half of women indicated experiencing verbal stranger harassment (e.g., whistling, obscene sounds, inappropriate comments about the body, sexist slurs, and sexually explicit comments and names) and 41% reported experiencing physically aggressive forms of stranger harassment (e.g., being fondled,

followed, flashed, and/or forced to do something sexual; Kearn, 2014). Among undergraduate female college students, Fairchild and Rudman (2010) found that 29% reported experiencing “unwanted sexual attention” from strangers once a month and 28% reported experiencing “catcalls, whistles, or stares” every few days or more. Previous research has indicated that stranger harassment may have negative effects on women’s mental health outcomes. In particular, researchers have found that more experiences of stranger harassment are associated with greater body surveillance, body shame, anxiety, fear, and negative emotions (Davidson, Butchko, Robbins, Sherd, & Gervais, 2016; Davidson, Gervais, & Sherd, 2015; Fairchild, 2010; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Graham, Bernards, Abbey, Dumas, & Wells, 2016).

### **Stranger Harassment and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder**

According to the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), an individual must first have had “Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence...” to meet criteria for PTSD (p. 271). Although stranger harassment is not typically life-threatening or violent, it may be experienced by women as threatened sexual violence and thus a traumatic event. This is because women may perceive stranger harassment as sexually objectifying and an intrusion on personal and physical boundaries (Bowman, 1993). Consequently, experiences of stranger harassment may evoke in women feelings of sexual vulnerability and defenselessness (Macmillan, Nierobisz, & Welsh, 2000). These feelings may be compounded by women’s uncertainty and fear related to whether harassing behaviors by strangers will escalate to sexual violence (Bowman, 1993; Davidson et al., 2016; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Kissling, 1991; Macmillan et al., 2000). Indeed, in her survey of U.S. women, Kearn (2014) found that two-thirds

of respondents indicated feeling worried about whether their experiences of street harassment would escalate. In addition, research has demonstrated significant links between street harassment and less perceived safety (Davidson et al., 2016; Macmillan et al., 2000) and more perceived risk of rape (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008).

PTSD is composed of four symptom clusters: re-experiencing, avoidance, negative changes in mood and thoughts, and hyperarousal (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Women who have experienced stranger harassment may have flashbacks of the event that are triggered by external cues (e.g., walking through the neighborhood where the harassment took place), emotional states (e.g., feeling frightened or vulnerable), or other internal cues (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). They may also experience nightmares and disturbed memories related to the event. Furthermore, women who have endured stranger harassment may experience anxiety due to anticipating the harassment will happen again. Consequently, women may engage in “safety behaviors” or avoidance strategies that aim to reduce trauma-related distress (Dunmore, Clark, & Ehlers, 1999, 2001; Ehlers & Clark, 2000). For example, a woman who has experienced stranger harassment may avoid a specific street where the harassment took place or refuse to leave her home after dark. Consistent with this notion, Kearl (2014) discovered that 24% of women ceased going to the public place where they were harassed. Safety behaviors may strengthen a woman’s maladaptive belief that unless she follows through with these preventative actions, she will be sexually assaulted (Ehlers & Clark, 2000).

Negative beliefs about the self, other individuals and/or the world may develop due to experiencing stranger harassment (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Women who perceive stranger harassment as an enduring threat may view the world as an unsafe place,

resulting in feelings of anxiety, fear and helplessness. McDermut, Haaga, and Kirk (2000) found that female students who were sexually harassed endorsed less favorable beliefs about the world compared to students who had not experienced sexual harassment. Women may also develop negative beliefs about the self in response to stranger harassment, such as taking responsibility for the harassment (e.g., “It was my fault that it happened”) or believing they are a bad person (e.g., “I am damaged”), in turn leading to negative emotions such as guilt and shame (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). Finally, hyperarousal symptoms may emerge from experiences of stranger harassment because of the lack of certainty related to escalating hostility from male aggressors. Women may feel tense, agitated or be easily startled around unfamiliar men or in certain public settings due to hypervigilance surrounding the threat of sexual assault. This is compatible with evidence which indicates that almost half of women begin to assess their surroundings after experiencing street harassment (Kearl, 2014).

Although no studies have examined the relation between stranger harassment and PTSD symptoms, previous research has examined the link between other forms of sexual harassment and PTSD symptoms. In a study of women involved in a sexual harassment class action lawsuit, Palmieri and Fitzgerald (2005) found a positive association between frequency of sexual harassment and PTSD symptoms. A meta-analysis of the effects of workplace sexual harassment on women similarly indicated that experiencing sexual harassment predicted increased PTSD symptoms (Willness et al., 2007). Using a longitudinal design and a sample of women who had experienced intimate partner violence, Stockdale et al. (2009) found that workplace sexual harassment predicted PTSD symptoms beyond the effects of previous abuse, victimization, and psychological distress. Similarly, Rosenthal et al. (2016) found that for female graduate students,

the relation between sexual harassment from teachers and peers and PTSD symptoms remained significant when controlling for previous sexual assault, stalking, and dating violence while in graduate school. Furthermore, Ho et al. (2012) examined sexual harassment experiences in school as well as the workplace and found that female high school and college students who had experienced more sexual harassment reported greater PTSD symptom severity. As stranger harassment is a form of sexual harassment, these studies provide preliminary support for the predicted link between stranger harassment and PTSD symptoms.

### **Self-Blame as a Mediator**

Women may respond and cope with stranger harassment by blaming themselves, consequently predicting PTSD symptoms. However, no studies have examined the links among women's stranger harassment, self-blame and PTSD. Alternatively, a significant body of research on women's responses to experiences of rape and sexual assault has indicated that self-blame is related to the development of PTSD symptoms (Arata, 1999; Arata & Burkhart, 1996; Frazier, 1990, 2000; Koss, Figueredo, & Prince, 2002; Ullman, Filipas, Townsend, & Starzynski, 2007). As rape, sexual assault, and stranger/sexual harassment are all considered forms of sexual victimization and thus have underlying similarities, we will discuss them here together (Jensen & Gutek, 1982; Weiss, 2010).

Engagement in self-blame following an experience of stranger harassment may be due to the acceptance of societal rape myths (Burt, 1980), or widespread unfounded attitudes and beliefs that "...serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women" (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 134). Common rape myths include notions that the female victim is lying about being raped and that only certain types of women (e.g., promiscuous women) are raped.

Women may internalize rape myths, which are maintained and reinforced through victim-blaming (Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral, 2009). Findings from multiple studies on sexual assault in women have demonstrated the significant prevalence of victim-blaming (Campbell et al., 2009). Furthermore, research has established that victim-blaming exacerbates self-blame and is linked with PTSD symptoms (Campbell et al., 2009).

Victim-blaming also occurs in cases of workplace/academic sexual harassment, with both men and women blaming women for being sexually harassed (Cowan, 2000; De Judicibus & McCabe, 2001; Jensen & Gutek, 1982; Kenig & Ryan, 1986; Malovich & Stake, 1990). Thus, women who experience stranger harassment may be socialized to blame themselves due to expectations that others will hold them responsible for being harassed (Janoff-Bulman, 1979; Jensen & Gutek, 1982). In a qualitative study, Weiss (2010) similarly found a theme of “anticipatory blame” in women’s narratives of sexual victimization experiences and posited that this may be related to a fear of negative judgement from others (p. 295). Consequently, women who have experienced stranger harassment may engage in self-blame by identifying past behaviors that they believe incited the harassment (e.g., wearing certain clothing or walking alone at night), in turn predicting PTSD symptoms.

Women may also blame themselves in response to stranger harassment because attributing responsibility to the self implies that the harassment is controllable rather than arbitrary or a chance occurrence (Janoff-Bulman, 1979; Larsen & Fitzgerald, 2010). Among women who had experienced workplace sexual harassment, Larsen and Fitzgerald (2010) found that greater self-blame was linked to more perceived control over future harassment, which in turn was linked to more PTSD symptoms. They posited that women who have endured sexual

harassment may engage in self-blame as a way to experience control over the event and reduce feelings of fear and unsafety. However, women's perceived control over future harassment may manifest as avoidance strategies, which is a significant factor in the onset and maintenance of PTSD symptoms (Dunmore et al., 1999, 2001; Ehlers & Clark, 2000).

### **Shame as a Mediator**

Another potential mediator in the link between women's stranger harassment and PTSD symptoms is shame. Shame involves a fear of social rejection and feelings of embarrassment, humiliation and inferiority (Budden, 2009). Shame is multifaceted in that these social components trigger individuals to make harsh negative attributions about themselves, consequently impacting self-worth (Budden, 2009; DeCou, Cole, Lynch, Wong, & Matthews, 2017). Scholars have found that feelings of shame are associated with PTSD symptoms in women who have experienced intimate partner violence (Beck et al., 2011), sexual assault (DeCou et al., 2017; La Bash & Papa, 2014; Vidal & Petrak, 2007), and physical assault (La Bash & Papa, 2014). Similarly, shame may also predict PTSD symptoms in women who have experienced stranger harassment.

Women who have experienced sexual victimization, such as stranger harassment, may be more likely to respond with feelings of shame because of the greater potential for negative social reactions (DeCou et al., 2017; Ullman & Filipas, 2001; Ullman et al., 2007). DeCou et al. (2017) found that shame mediated the link between negative social reactions (e.g., victim-blaming) and PTSD symptoms in female college students who had experienced sexual assault. Weiss (2010) proposed that women may feel ashamed following experiences of rape, sexual assault or sexual harassment due to the internalization of "...ideas that women are deserving, disgraced or

defamed by sexual victimization” (p. 303). For example, shame may emerge from the internalization of false societal beliefs that promiscuous women are responsible for being sexually victimized or that women are “unclean” after experiencing sexual victimization (Weiss, 2010, p. 296).

### **Fear of Rape as a Mediator**

Stranger harassment experiences may also be linked to fear of rape, which in turn may predict PTSD symptoms. Women are especially fearful of rape relative to other types of crime (Warr, 1985). In addition, research has indicated a significant difference between men and women in their levels of fear of rape, with women reporting more fear of rape than men (Ferraro, 1996; Fisher & Sloan, 2003; Warr, 1985). Evidence from multiple studies has demonstrated that women are more fearful of being raped by a stranger than an acquaintance (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1997; Pryor & Hughes, 2013; Wilcox, Jordan & Pritchard, 2006) and this may be due to previous frightening stranger harassment experiences. Because of a lack of predictability associated with interactions with male strangers, women may perceive stranger harassment as signaling potential sexual violence, leading to worry and decreased feelings of safety (Davidson et al., 2016; Macmillan et al., 2000; Scott, 2003). Macmillan et al. (2000) found that Canadian women’s previous experiences of stranger harassment predicted their worry while walking by oneself in a parking garage and at night and when using public transportation. Fairchild and Rudman (2008) found that stranger harassment was related to more perceived risk of rape. In addition, Davidson et al. (2016) discovered that more experiences of street harassment among women was linked to greater anxiety through less perceived safety in isolated public settings. Scholars have demonstrated that experiencing negative emotions such as fear and anxiety in



response to a traumatic event may consequently lead to the development of PTSD symptoms (Brewin, Andrews, & Rose, 2000; Ehlers & Clark, 2000). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that fear of rape among women is linked to restriction of movement in public spaces (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Riger & Gordon, 1981; Warr, 1985) and other “precautionary behaviors” (e.g., avoidance of flirting with unknown men) against sexual assault by a stranger (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1997). Although women may engage in these avoidance behaviors in order to mitigate their fear of rape, ultimately, these actions may play a role in the persistence of PTSD symptoms (Dunmore et al., 1999, 2001; Ehlers & Clark, 2000).

### **Feminine Norms as a Moderator**

Feminine gender norms are rules and standards of a dominant culture surrounding femininity that shape women’s thoughts, emotions and behaviors (Mahalik et al., 2005). These norms are regulated through reinforcement and policing from others. Examples of feminine gender norms include being amicable toward others (i.e., sweet and nice) and engaging in sexual activity within one monogamous relationship (i.e., sexual fidelity). Women who place importance on conformity to prescribed feminine gender norms may experience significant distress if they view their behaviors as incongruent with these societal expectations (Benetti-McQuoid & Bursik, 2005; Weiss, 2010). As sexual victimization may be experienced as threatening to women’s gender self-concept, women’s conformity to feminine gender norms may influence the extent to which they perceive stranger harassment as distressing, in turn compounding the negative effects of stranger harassment on PTSD symptoms (Weiss, 2010). To that end, conformity to the feminine gender norms of sweet and nice and sexual fidelity may

qualify the a) direct links between stranger harassment and PTSD, self-blame, shame, and fear of rape and b) indirect links between stranger harassment and PTSD symptoms.

Rederstorff, Buchanan, and Settles (2007) found that the relation between sexual harassment and PTSD symptoms was stronger for white female college students (but not black female college students) who endorsed more traditional gender attitudes compared to students with less traditional gender attitudes. The authors posited that this was because women who hold traditional gender beliefs may blame themselves for being sexually harassed. In agreement with this notion, Jensen and Gutek (1982) found that women who had experienced workplace sexual harassment and endorsed greater acceptance of traditional gender roles were more likely to hold themselves responsible for the harassment compared to women who endorsed less acceptance of traditional gender roles.

These findings are potentially due to pervasive societal expectations which dictate that women are responsible for preserving their sexual purity and protecting themselves from sexual violence (Jensen & Gutek, 1982; Weiss, 2010). Consequently, women may blame themselves for receiving unwanted sexual attention from strangers due to believing they did something sexually provocative to incite the harassment, thus deviating from the norm of sexual fidelity. In addition, Fairchild and Rudman (2008) found that women typically respond to stranger harassment by using passive coping strategies such as ignoring the harasser. Although women may ignore stranger harassment due to feeling frightened or uncomfortable, this response may lead to escalating hostility, as the harasser may expect an appreciative or friendly response (Kissling, 1991). Women who assign significance to being sweet and nice but respond to stranger

harassment with passivity may endorse greater self-blame due to recognizing that their behaviors are contrary to this norm.

Women who uphold greater conformity to sexual fidelity may also report more shame in response to stranger harassment. Shame may emerge due to feeling dirtied by stranger harassment, and this reaction may be particularly prevalent in women who place importance on being sexually virtuous. Moreover, for women who value always being pleasant toward others, responding to stranger harassment by ignoring the harasser may produce significant feelings of shame. Efthim, Kenny, and Mahalik (2001) found that gender role stress from perceiving one's behaviors as deviating from expected gender role norms was associated with shame in both men and women. In addition, Benetti-McQuoid and Bursik (2005) found that women who endorsed greater conformity to feminine gender norms were more likely to experience shame relative to women who reported less conformity.

The link between stranger harassment experiences and fear of rape may similarly be exacerbated due to high levels of conformity to feminine norms. For women who adhere to the norm of sexual fidelity, sexual assault may be viewed as a particularly terrifying threat because of the perception that rape is not only a physical violation, but also disgraceful and damaging to one's sexual reputation (Weiss, 2010). Women who report greater conformity to being sweet and nice may be more fearful of rape because of feelings of helplessness related to resisting unwanted sexual advances. Curtin, Ward, Merriwether, and Caruthers (2011) found that more endorsement of traditional feminine norms among women predicted less sexual assertiveness. Thus, women who assign importance to being amiable toward others may feel distressed about

refusing unsolicited sexual attention, as it would be considered a violation of this norm (Wigderson & Katz, 2015).

### **Feminist Identification as a Moderator**

Feminist consciousness offers a framework for comprehending the system of patriarchy and sexism. This may assist women in identifying stranger harassment as experiences of gendered oppression, protecting them from the harmful effects of such experiences because they contextualize these sexist events rather than internalize them (Klonis, Endo, Crosby, & Worell, 1997; Szymanski & Owens, 2009). Research has indicated that women's endorsement of feminism is related to more psychological well-being (Saunders & Kashubeck-West, 2006; Yakushko, 2007; Yoder, Snell, & Tobias, 2012) and less body shame/disordered eating (Murnen & Smolak, 2009). Furthermore, Kucharska (2018) found that feminist identity predicted more self-esteem and less depression in women, and these links were stronger for women who had experienced sexual trauma compared to women who had experienced non-sexual trauma. In addition, Landrine and Klonoff (1997) demonstrated that feminist identification had a buffering effect on the relation between sexist experiences and psychological distress, such that the link between these variables was weaker for feminist-identified women relative to women who did not endorse feminist identification. Feminist identification may similarly have a protective effect on PTSD symptoms in women who have experienced stranger harassment. We hypothesized that feminist identification may serve as a resiliency factor, qualifying the a) direct links between stranger harassment and PTSD symptoms, self-blame, shame, and fear of rape and b) indirect links between stranger harassment and PTSD symptoms.

Feminist identification may play a role in assisting women who have experienced stranger harassment combat feelings of helplessness associated with PTSD symptoms. In a qualitative study, Gefter, Bankoff, Valentine, Rood, and Pantalone (2013) found that female college students who had experienced physical or sexual abuse by a male perpetrator reported that feminist identification aided them in feeling less helpless and damaged as well as more assertive and independent. Furthermore, scholars have demonstrated associations between women's feminist identification and autonomy, personal growth, and self-efficacy (Eisele & Stake, 2008; Saunders & Kashubeck-West, 2006; Yakushko, 2007). Feminist identification is also related to women's positive appraisal of utilizing proactive coping (i.e., seeking social support and/or confronting the perpetrator; Leaper & Arias, 2011) and increased likelihood of confronting perpetrators (Ayres, Friedman, & Leaper, 2009) when faced with sexism.

In labeling stranger harassment as gendered discrimination, feminist women are able to recognize that experiences of stranger harassment negatively impact *all* women (Duncan, 1999; Foster, 2000; Klonis et al., 1997). Women who identify as feminists may feel empowered that they can do something about stranger harassment because of greater awareness of sexism and solidarity with other women. Nelson et al. (2008) found that among female college students, feminist identification predicted collective action against sexism. Furthermore, Szymanski and Owens (2009) found that for lesbian and bisexual women, involvement in feminist activism buffered the negative effects of sexism on psychological distress. Taken together, these findings suggest that feminist identification may promote resiliency against the negative impact of stranger harassment on PTSD symptoms in women.

Due to having a greater awareness of sexism, feminist women who have experienced stranger harassment may be less likely to attribute fault to themselves but rather understand that stranger harassment is a function of living in a patriarchal society where acceptance of rape myths is still prevalent. Consistent with this idea, Geftter et al. (2013) found that feminist beliefs predicted less self-blame in female college students who had experienced physical or sexual abuse. In particular, they found that feminist beliefs played a role in helping female survivors of abuse “reframe” punitive beliefs about themselves. Furthermore, Kucharska (2018) found that women with more developed feminist identities were less likely to experience feelings of guilt, an emotion that is typically associated with self-blame. Feminism may similarly have a protective effect on women who have experienced stranger harassment by providing them with the tools needed to reframe their beliefs about the harassment, decreasing their likelihood of engaging in self-blame.

Feminist identification fosters solidarity among women, and this may result in less feelings of shame related to sexual victimization. Geftter et al. (2013) discovered that greater endorsement of feminist beliefs in women who had experienced abuse was associated with less shame and more connection with other women. They also found that women who identified with feminism felt less isolated and alone. To that end, feminist identification may have a buffering effect on the relation between stranger harassment and shame because feminism encourages women coming together and supporting one another in the face of gendered discrimination. Finally, studies have demonstrated that women who endorse feminist values reported feeling less helpless, acting more assertive, and perceiving themselves as being capable of confronting a perpetrator of sexual harassment (Ayres et al., 2009; Geftter et al., 2013; Leaper & Arias, 2011;

Yoder et al., 2012). Consequently, these women may be less fearful of rape due to having greater confidence that they will be able to protect themselves against unsolicited sexual attention from strangers. Yoder et al. (2012) found that women with more established feminist identities reported more sexual assertiveness/sexual refusal. Thus, feminist identification may also serve as a protective factor in the relation between stranger harassment and fear of rape.

### **The Present Study**

In the current study, we examined three potential mediators and two potential moderators in the link between experiences of women's experiences of stranger harassment and PTSD symptoms (see Figure 1). Our specific hypotheses were:

1. Self-blame, shame, and fear of rape would mediate the relation between stranger harassment experiences and PTSD symptoms. That is, more experiences of stranger harassment would predict higher levels of self-blame, shame and fear of rape, which in turn would be related to more PTSD symptoms.
2. Conformity to the feminine norms of sweet and nice and sexual fidelity would moderate and exacerbate the direct relations between stranger harassment experiences and PTSD symptoms while feminist identification would moderate and buffer the direct relation between stranger harassment experiences and PTSD symptoms. Thus, the relations would be stronger when conformity to sweet and nice and sexual fidelity is high and weaker when conformity to these feminine norms is low. Alternatively, the relationship would be weaker when feminist identification is high and stronger when feminist identification is low.

3. Conformity to feminine norms of sweet and nice and sexual fidelity would moderate and exacerbate the direct relations between stranger harassment and our proposed mediators (self-blame, shame and fear of rape), while feminist identification would moderate and buffer the direct relations between stranger harassment and our proposed mediators. Thus, the relations would be stronger when conformity to sweet and nice and sexual fidelity is high and weaker when conformity to these feminine norms is low. Alternatively, the relationship would be weaker when feminist identification is high and stronger when feminist identification is low.
4. Conformity to feminine norms (sweet and nice and sexual fidelity) and feminist identification would moderate the mediated relations of stranger harassment experiences via our three proposed mediators with PTSD symptoms. Specifically, the relations between stranger harassment experiences and self-blame and shame and fear of rape, along with their conditional indirect effects, on PTSD symptoms would be stronger when conformity to sweet and nice and sexual fidelity norms are high and weaker when conformity to these feminine norms are low as well as weaker when feminist identification is high and stronger when feminist identification is low.



## Chapter 2

### Method

#### Participants

The initial sample comprised 373 participants who completed an online survey. Three participants who self-identified as male at birth, one participant older than 30 years, one participant residing outside the U.S., and one participant who was missing more than 20% of items for a particular measure were eliminated from the dataset, which resulted in a final sample of 367 participants.

Of the 367 participants in the final sample, 97% identified as a woman and 3% identified as genderqueer/gender non-conforming. Regarding sexual orientation, participants identified as heterosexual (59%), lesbian/gay (3%), bisexual (34%), and asexual (5%). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 30 years, with a mean age of 24.80 ( $SD = 3.36$ ). The sample was 1% African American/Black, 2% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 2% Hispanic/Latino or Latina, 1% Native American/Alaskan Native, 89% Caucasian/White, and 6% Biracial/Multiracial.

Forty-six percent of participants ( $n = 169$ ) were currently enrolled in a college or university, with 4% reporting being first-year students, 12% sophomores, 21% juniors, 15% seniors, 33% graduate students and 15% other. Of the 54% of participants not enrolled in a college or university ( $n = 198$ ), 16% attained a high school diploma, 11% an associate's college degree, 50% a bachelor's college degree, and 23% a graduate/professional degree. In terms of social class, participants reported as 1% wealthy class, 31% upper-middle class, 38% lower-middle class, 25% working class, and 6% poor class. Participants resided in the Northeast (25%),

Midwest (24%), South (24%), and West (27%) regions of the U.S. Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100%.

## **Procedure**

We recruited participants through Facebook advertisements. The advertisement included the name of the study (i.e., Young Adult Women's Attitudes and Experiences Survey) and a brief description of it (i.e., Are you a woman between 18 and 30 years old? We want to hear from you. Research study about young adult women's well-being and gender-related attitudes and experiences). After participants clicked on Facebook ad, the embedded hypertext link directed them to our online informed consent and survey. We assessed PTSD symptoms first to reduce response and common method biases and decrease the possibility that a woman's memories of stranger harassment could affect her responses to the PTSD symptoms scale (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). We randomly ordered the rest of the measures in the survey, which was followed by demographic questions. As an incentive to participate, we provided all participants with the option of entering a raffle drawing, awarding a \$50 online merchant gift card to each of four randomly chosen individuals. We used a separate raffle database so a participant's contact information could not be linked to her survey responses.

## **Measures**

**Stranger Harassment.** We assessed stranger harassment using a modified version of the Stranger Harassment Index (SHI; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). Example items include "In the past year, how frequently have you experienced unwanted sexual attention or interaction from a stranger?" and "In the past year, how frequently have you experienced unwanted touching, stroking or hugging from a stranger?" The original 18-item scale first asks participants to

indicate “yes” or “no” to having ever experienced nine different behaviors from a stranger and then asks about frequency of experiences of these behaviors using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *once*; 2 = *once a month*; 3 = *2-4 times per month*; 4 = *every few days*; 5 = *everyday*). Our modified 9-item version asked participants to indicate ever having experienced these behaviors from a stranger and frequency of experiences of behaviors in the same question, using a 6-point Likert scale (0 = *never*; 1 = *once in the past year*; 2 = *once a month*; 3 = *2-4 times per month*; 4 = *every few days*; 5 = *everyday*). Mean scores were used with higher scores indicating more experiences of stranger harassment. Fairchild and Rudman (2008) demonstrated support for reliability ( $\alpha = .85$ ) as well as structural (via exploratory factor analysis) and construct (via positive relations with self-objectification and perceived risk of rape) validity. For the current sample,  $\alpha$  was .92.

**Self-Blame.** We assessed self-blame using the 5-item internalization/self-blame subscale from the Coping with Discrimination Scale, which measures the tendency to attribute cause or responsibility of a discriminatory event to oneself (Wei, Alvarez, Ku, Russell, & Bonett, 2010). Participants were asked to indicate how much each strategy listed best described the ways they deal with experiences of stranger harassment (i.e., experiences of unwanted sexual comments, gestures, and behaviors by strangers). Example items include “I wonder if I did something to provoke this incident” and “I wonder if I did something wrong.” Each item is rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*never like me*) to 6 (*always like me*). Mean scores were used with higher scores indicating greater self-blame in response to stranger harassment. Wei et al. (2010) demonstrated support for reliability ( $\alpha$ 's ranged from .77 - .82), 2-week test-retest reliability ( $r = .82$ ) and structural validity (via both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses). Construct

validity was supported by positive correlations with depression and the general coping style of self-blame and negative correlations with self-esteem and life satisfaction. For the current sample,  $\alpha$  was .91.

**Shame.** We assessed shame using the 8-item Abuse-Specific Shame Questionnaire (Feiring & Taska, 2005). Example items include “What happened to me makes me feel dirty” and “When I think about what happened, I wish I were invisible.” Participants were instructed to indicate how true each statement is for them, using a 3-point Likert-type scale (0 = *not true*; 1 = *somewhat true*; 2 = *very true*) as they relate to their experiences of stranger harassment. Mean scores were used with higher scores indicating greater shame in response to stranger harassment. Feiring and Taska (2005) demonstrated support for reliability ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and construct validity [via positive correlations with proneness to general (non-abuse specific) shame, non-verbal shame, and PTSD symptoms]. For the current sample,  $\alpha$  was .88.

**Fear of Rape.** We assessed fear of rape using the 31-item Fear of Rape Scale, which measures emotional and behavioral responses to the possibility of being raped, including behavioral strategies aimed at reducing the likelihood of being raped (Senn & Dzinan, 1996). Example items include “If I have to take the subway/bus alone at night I feel anxious,” “I am afraid of being sexually assaulted” and “In general, how safe do you feel at night?” Twenty-six items are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*) and five reverse-scored items are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*very unsafe*) to 4 (*very safe*). Mean scores were used, with higher scores indicating greater fear of rape. Senn and Dzinan (1996) demonstrated support for internal reliability ( $\alpha = .91$ ) and structural validity (via exploratory factor analysis). Construct validity was supported by demonstrating that fear of rape

was related to living in one's neighborhood for a shorter (versus longer) period of time and having experienced recent sexual coercion. For the current sample,  $\alpha$  was .95.

**Conformity to Feminine Norms.** We assessed conformity to feminine norms using the Sweet and Nice and Sexual Fidelity subscales (5 items each) from the Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory-short form, which measures the extent to which women adhere to culturally dominant feminine gender-role expectations related to interpersonal interactions and sexual behaviors (Mahalik et al., 2005; Parent & Moradi, 2010). Example items include "Being nice to others is extremely important" (Sweet and Nice) and "I would feel guilty if I had a one-night stand" (Sexual Fidelity). Participants rated each item on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Mean scores were used, with higher scores indicating greater conformity to sweet and nice and sexual fidelity norms. Parent and Moradi (2010) demonstrated support for reliability ( $\alpha$ 's for Sweet and Nice and Sexual Fidelity were .73 and .82, respectively) and structural validity (via confirmatory factor analyses). Mahalik et al. (2005) provided support for construct validity via positive relations with another measure of adherence to traditional gender roles and by demonstrating that women scored higher than men on the Sweet and Nice and Sexual Fidelity subscales. Parent and Moradi (2010) demonstrated strong positive correlations between the long and short forms of the Sweet and Nice and Sexual Fidelity subscales. For the current sample,  $\alpha$ 's were .74 (Sweet and Nice) and .90 (Sexual Fidelity).

**Feminist Identification.** We assessed feminist identification using the 4-item Self-Identification as a Feminist scale, which measures private and public identification as a feminist, importance of feminist values and beliefs, and support for the feminist movement (Szymanski, 2004). Example items include "I consider myself a feminist" and "Feminist values and principles

are important to me.” Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Mean scores were used with higher scores indicating greater feminist self-identification. Szymanski (2004) demonstrated support for reliability ( $\alpha = .93$ ), structural validity (via exploratory factor analyses), and construct validity (via positive correlations with other measures of feminism and negative correlations with passive acceptance of traditional gender roles and conservative ideology). For the current sample,  $\alpha$  was .95.

**Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms.** We assessed PTSD symptoms using the 20-item revised Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist, which measures PTSD symptom criteria in the *DSM-5* (Blevins, Weathers, Davis, Witte & Domino, 2015). Participants were asked to indicate how much they had been bothered by each problem in the last month. Example items include “Repeated, disturbing dreams of the stressful experience?” and “Feeling jumpy, or easily startled?” Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*extremely*). Mean scores were used with higher scores indicating more PTSD symptoms. Blevins et al. (2015) demonstrated support for internal reliability ( $\alpha$ 's ranged from .94 - .95), test-retest reliability ( $r = .82$ ) and structural validity (via confirmatory factor analyses). Construct validity was supported by strong correlations with other PTSD measures, moderate correlations with related constructs (e.g., depression), and weak correlations with unrelated constructs (e.g., antisocial personality features). For the current sample,  $\alpha$  was .94.

## Chapter 3

### Results

#### Preliminary Analyses and Descriptive Data

Analysis of patterns of missing data for the 367 participants included in the sample indicated that 87.47% of participants had no missing data, 57.47% of the items were not missing data for any case, and no single item had .8% or more of missing values. Missing data was minimal so we used available case analysis procedures, a kind of conditional mean imputation, to address missing data points. As such, missing values were imputed from each participant's observed scores on the measure where missing points happen (Parent, 2013).

Examination of absolute values of skewness (range = .39 – 1.26) and kurtosis (range = .26 – .95) for each variable indicated sufficient normality (i.e., skewness < 3, kurtosis < 10; Weston & Gore, 2006). One multivariate outlier was observed (Mahalanobis distance  $p < .001$ ). We retained this outlier because we could not see any justifiable reason to remove it and it did not have a significant bearing on the overall model (Cook's distance < 1; Field, 2013). Means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations among all variables assessed in this study are shown in Table 1. At the bivariate level, women with more experiences of stranger harassment were at greater risk for PTSD symptoms ( $r = .50$ ). Variance inflation factors for all analyses were < 10 indicating that multicollinearity was not an issue (Field, 2013).

#### Mediation Analyses

We used the PROCESS SPSSv2.1 macro (Hayes, 2013; Model 4) to test the mediation model described in Hypothesis 1. We used bootstrapping analyses with 10,000 bootstrapping resamples to produce 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effect. Mediation is significant as

well as meaningful if the confidence interval does not include zero (Hayes, 2013). The results of our mediation model are shown in Figure 2. The test of mediation using bootstrapping analyses revealed that self-blame (mean indirect [unstandardized] effect = .06;  $SE = .01$ , 95% CI [.031, .091],  $\beta = .06$ ), shame (mean indirect [unstandardized] effect = .15;  $SE = .03$ , 95% CI [.102, .214],  $\beta = .16$ ), and fear of rape (mean indirect [unstandardized] effect = .03;  $SE = .01$ , 95% CI [.008, .056],  $\beta = .03$ ) mediated the stranger harassment-PTSD symptoms links. The variables in the model accounted for 51% of the variance in the PTSD symptoms scores.

### **Moderator and Moderated Mediation Analyses**

We used PROCESS (Hayes, 2013; Model 8) again to test Hypotheses 2, 3 and 4. Predictor and interaction terms were mean centered for analyses. Results of the moderated analyses for sweet in nice are presented in Table 2, sexual fidelity in Table 3, and feminist identification in Table 4. Contrary to Hypothesis 2, results indicated that conformity to feminine norms of sweet and nice and sexual fidelity as well as feminist identification did not moderate the stranger harassment-PTSD symptoms link. Furthermore, inconsistent with Hypothesis 3, conformity to sweet and nice did not moderate the links between stranger harassment and self-blame, shame, and fear of rape. Alternatively, in support of Hypothesis 3, findings revealed that conformity to sexual fidelity ( $\beta = .11$ ;  $R^2$  change = .012; significant F change = .018) moderated the link between stranger harassment and shame. Stranger harassment predicted shame for women with low (-1  $SD$ ;  $B = .22$ ,  $t = 5.62$ ,  $p = .000$ , 95% CI [.142, .295]), at the mean ( $B = .29$ ,  $t = 10.02$ ,  $p = .000$ , 95% CI [.230, .342]) and high (+1  $SD$ ;  $B = .35$ ,  $t = 8.55$ ,  $p = .000$ , 95% CI [.272, .435]) levels of sexual fidelity (see Figure 3). However, this relation was stronger for women with high sexual fidelity. Conformity to sexual fidelity did not moderate the links



between stranger harassment and self-blame and fear of rape. Also consistent with Hypothesis 3, results indicated that feminist identification ( $\beta = -.15$ ;  $R^2$  change = .021; significant F change = .003) moderated the relation between stranger harassment and self-blame. Stranger harassment predicted self-blame for women with low ( $-1$  SD;  $B = .60$ ,  $t = 6.27$ ,  $p = .000$ , 95% CI [.415, .794]), at the mean ( $B = .40$ ,  $t = 5.58$ ,  $p = .000$ , 95% CI [.262, .547]) and high ( $+1$  SD;  $B = .24$ ,  $t = 2.55$ ,  $p = .011$ , 95% CI [.055, .425]) levels of feminist identification (see Figure 4). This relation was stronger for women with low feminist identification. Feminist identification did not moderate the links between stranger harassment and shame and fear of rape.

Moderated mediation analyses were conducted using 10,000 bootstrap samples to evaluate Hypothesis 4. Contrary to Hypothesis 4, conformity to sweet and nice did not moderate the indirect effect of stranger harassment on PTSD through self-blame (Index of Moderation Mediation =  $-.011$ , SE [boot] =  $.019$ , 95% CI [ $-.052$ ,  $.027$ ]), shame (Index of Moderation Mediation =  $.024$ , SE [boot] =  $.028$ , 95% CI [ $-.028$ ,  $.083$ ]), and fear of rape (Index of Moderation Mediation =  $-.006$ , SE [boot] =  $.011$ , 95% CI [ $-.039$ ,  $.009$ ]). Supporting Hypothesis 4, results indicated that the indirect effect of stranger harassment on PTSD symptoms through shame was moderated by conformity to sexual fidelity (Index of Moderation Mediation =  $.04$ , SE [boot] =  $.019$ , 95% CI [ $.008$ ,  $.080$ ]). The indirect path was significant when sexual fidelity was low ( $-1$  SD;  $B = .12$ ; boot estimate =  $.03$ ; 95% CI [ $.074$ ,  $.184$ ]), at the mean ( $B = .16$ ; boot estimate =  $.03$ ; 95% CI [ $.106$ ,  $.222$ ]), and high ( $+1$  SD;  $B = .20$ ; boot estimate =  $.04$ ; 95% CI [ $.127$ ,  $.283$ ]) but this relation was stronger for women with high sexual fidelity. Findings indicated no support for the associated conditional indirect effects of stranger harassment on PTSD symptoms through self-

blame (Index of Moderation Mediation = .013, SE [boot] =.013, 95% CI [-.010, .041]) and fear of rape (Index of Moderation Mediation = -.00, SE [boot] =.007, 95% CI [-.018, .012]).

Finally, consistent with Hypothesis 4, results demonstrated that that the indirect effect of stranger harassment on PTSD symptoms through self-blame was moderated by feminist identification (Index of Moderation Mediation = -.028, SE [boot] =.011, 95% CI [-.052, -.009]). The indirect path was significant when feminist identification was low (-1 SD;  $B = .09$ ; boot estimate = .02; 95% CI [.052, .143]), at the mean ( $B = .06$ ; boot estimate =.02; 95% CI [.034, .099]), and high (+1 SD;  $B = .04$ ; boot estimate =.02; 95% CI [.009, .074]) but this relation was stronger for women with low feminist identification. However, there was no support for the associated conditional indirect effects of stranger harassment on PTSD symptoms through shame (Index of Moderation Mediation = -.009, SE [boot] =.016, 95% CI [-.043, .018]) and fear of rape (Index of Moderation Mediation = .004, SE [boot] =.007, 95% CI [-.006, .022]).

## Chapter 4

### Discussion

Our study contributes to feminist research on factors which perpetuate a culture of sexual violence against women. Stranger harassment acts as a force of social control by reminding women of the potential punishment (sexual violence) that comes with “trespassing” in public spaces (Kissling, 1991, p. 454). Although stranger harassment is often present in the everyday lives of women, it is an understudied form of gendered oppression. Our study extends the limited research in this area by examining the relation between experiences of stranger/street harassment and PTSD symptoms, as well as novel explanatory (i.e., self-blame, shame, and fear of rape), risk (adherence to traditional feminine norms of sweet and nice and sexual fidelity), and resiliency (feminist identification) factors via a moderation mediation model.

We found that stranger harassment was both directly and indirectly related to PTSD symptoms. Although our study is the first to examine the relationship between stranger harassment and PTSD symptoms, our findings are comparable to a body of research that has demonstrated a link between women’s experiences of sexual harassment in work/academic settings and PTSD symptoms (Ho et al., 2012; Palmieri & Fitzgerald, 2005; Rosenthal et al., 2016; Stockdale et al., 2009; Willness et al., 2007). Moreover, our results are consistent with previous research linking women’s stranger harassment experiences to negative mental health outcomes including body surveillance, body shame, anxiety, fear and negative emotions (Davidson et al., 2016; Davidson et al., 2015; Fairchild, 2010; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Graham et al., 2016).

In terms of indirect effects, our findings suggest that self-blame, shame and fear of rape are important in explaining how stranger harassment is linked to women’s PTSD symptoms. We

found that more experiences of stranger harassment were related to higher levels of self-blame, shame, and fear of rape. In turn, these variables were related to greater PTSD symptoms. Our findings further contribute to research which suggests that self-blame (Arata, 1999; Arata & Burkhart, 1999; Frazier, 1990, 2000; Koss et al., 2002; Ullman et al., 2007) and shame (DeCou et al., 2017; La Bash & Papa, 2014; Vidal & Petrak, 2007) play significant roles in predicting PTSD symptoms in women who have experienced sexual assault. In addition, these findings are consistent with research that indicates links between stranger harassment and less perceived safety (Davidson et al., 2015), more perceived risk of rape (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008), and greater worry related to walking alone in public and taking public transportation (Macmillan et al., 2000). Distressing emotions such as fear and anxiety resulting from traumatic experiences have been found to predict PTSD symptoms (Brewin et al., 2000; Ehlers & Clark, 2000), and are consistent with our finding that fear of rape mediates the relation between stranger harassment and PTSD symptoms.

Our findings also revealed that adherence to sexual fidelity norms has an intensifying role in the direct link between stranger harassment and shame and indirect link between stranger harassment and PTSD symptoms. This is consistent with the idea that women who place importance on having sex only in the context of a committed relationship may respond to stranger harassment with feelings of shame due to internalizing the belief that women who experience sexual victimization are “dirty” or “unclean” (Weiss, 2010, p. 296). Experiences of stranger harassment may cause these women to perceive themselves as deviating from their standards of sexual virtuousness, heightening distressing feelings such as shame. Our finding is also consistent with Benetti-McQuoid and Bursik’s (2005) discovery that women with high

levels of conformity to feminine gender norms reported more shame relative to women with low levels of conformity. In addition, our findings indicated that feminist identification has a protective role in the direct link between stranger harassment and self-blame and indirect link between stranger harassment and PTSD symptoms. Geffer et al. (2013) found that feminist beliefs were related to less self-blame in female survivors of physical or sexual abuse. An understanding of feminism may allow women to label experiences of stranger harassment as gendered discrimination rather than blame themselves. Indeed, externalization (rather than internalization) of sexist experiences is a cornerstone of feminism (Brown, 1994).

Finally, our findings demonstrated that no other moderated effects were significant. This suggests that stranger harassment experiences are negatively related to PTSD symptoms, self-blame, shame, and fear of rape regardless of a woman's conformity to the feminine norm of sweet and nice. This is potentially because women may be able to rationalize passive responses (e.g. ignoring) to stranger harassment as necessary in order to ensure their safety. Thus, it may not be a source of self-blame or shame. In addition, as stranger harassment is a form of sexual harassment, gender norms associated with sexuality (i.e., sexual fidelity) may be more salient than other norms, like being sweet and nice. Our findings also suggest that the exacerbating role of sexual fidelity beliefs and buffering role of feminist identity each target only one specific pathway (i.e., shame or self-blame) and do not influence the other explanatory pathways in our model. Future research is needed to identify variables that might moderate these links.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Our study is limited due to our findings being based on cross-sectional, correlational data. Consequently, our findings do not directly indicate causal relations among variables. Future

research would benefit from investigating the impact of stranger harassment on mental health outcomes using longitudinal designs. Diary methods, which allow researchers to detect the impact of everyday events on individuals over time (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003), may be particularly applicable to research on stranger harassment because it is a daily occurrence for many women. Furthermore, as our study utilized an online survey, only women with access to computers were able to participate. Moreover, in our analyses, we did not control for previous experiences of sexual assault/rape. However, evidence from previous studies has indicated that sexual harassment still remains a significant predictor of women's PTSD symptoms when taking into account past experiences of sexual victimization (Rosenthal et al., 2016; Stockdale et al., 2009). In addition, limitations related to self-report data (e.g., response sets, socially desirable responding, inaccuracy in reporting memories of events) should be taken into account when interpreting our findings.

Our findings are also limited due to having a predominantly white sample. Stranger harassment may have a different effect on women of color relative to white women due to it potentially being experienced as both racial and gendered discrimination (Davis, 1994). In particular, Davis (1994) proposed that because African American women have historically been dehumanized and oppressed through their hyper-sexualization by men, stranger harassment may have a unique impact on them relative to white women. Future studies should use racially diverse samples and examine the moderating effects of race in the links between stranger harassment and mental health outcomes. In addition, future research would benefit from exploring other potential risk (e.g., rape myth acceptance, internalized misogyny) and resiliency (e.g., social support, coping styles, self-compassion) factors.

## **Practical Implications**

Our results underscore the potential negative impact of stranger harassment experiences on women's mental health and the importance of targeting self-blame, shame, fear, and gender-related norms and attitudes in clinical intervention strategies. A feminist therapy approach may be particularly helpful in addressing these factors when working with women who have experienced stranger harassment. Feminist therapy emphasizes the development of feminist consciousness (Brown, 1994). Greater awareness of a patriarchal social system may aid women in framing their stranger harassment experiences as instances of gendered oppression, potentially reducing self-blame (Brown, 2004; Gefter et al., 2013). Furthermore, feminist therapists may conceptualize women's self-blame in response to stranger harassment as an effort to gain control over the environment (Brown, 2004). Thus, a feminist approach to treatment may stress reclaiming control through making meaning out of stranger harassment experiences. This may include encouraging female clients to engage in activism against stranger harassment. Involvement in activism may help combat feelings of shame by providing women with the realization that they are not alone in their experiences of stranger harassment as well as presenting opportunities to form connections with other women who have also endured stranger harassment (Brown, 2004; Cohen, 2008). Moreover, feminist therapy focuses on empowering women and fostering self-efficacy (Brown, 2004), potentially reducing women's feelings of helplessness and fear related to sexual violence. Finally, feminist therapists may target women's sexual fidelity beliefs by raising awareness of how these individual beliefs are connected to cultural gender norms that are constructed and reinforced through experiences of sexism and

how these beliefs may exacerbate their feelings of shame when encountering stranger harassment.

As stranger harassment is not typically well addressed in Western criminal justice systems (Bowman, 1993), involvement in activism and advocacy against stranger harassment may be particularly empowering for women. In support of this idea, Fileborn and Vera-Gray (2017) found that women who had experienced street harassment felt that criminal justice responses did not meet their needs. Female participants expressed wanting to focus on changing the underlying forces perpetuating street harassment, rather than pursuing individualized, retributive justice. Social justice organizations working toward ending stranger/street harassment such as Hollaback! and Stop Street Harassment conduct trainings and workshops as well as provide community initiative ideas and other tools that they make available to the public. Our research may be helpful in informing their prevention and intervention efforts by identifying specific mental health outcomes affected by stranger harassment. In addition, our findings may be beneficial in prevention efforts aimed at increasing men's awareness about the harmful effects of men's sexually harassing behaviors, reducing/eliminating their engagement in such behaviors, and increasing their willingness to appropriately intervene when they witness other men perpetrating stranger harassment.

## **Conclusions**

Although multiple studies have examined the impact of workplace/academic sexual harassment on women's psychological functioning, limited research has investigated the links between stranger harassment and mental health outcomes in women. Our study contributes to previous research by examining the relation between stranger harassment and PTSD symptoms,



utilizing a moderated mediation model. Our findings revealed that experiences of stranger harassment are positively linked to women's PTSD symptoms and that self-blame, shame, and fear of rape are important explanatory variables in this link. Furthermore, our results underscore the importance of sexual fidelity beliefs and feminist identification and their interaction with stranger harassment in understanding young adult women's shame and self-blame, and its' mediational links to PTSD symptoms. Taken together, these findings suggest that stranger harassment poses a threat to women's psychological health.

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## Appendix

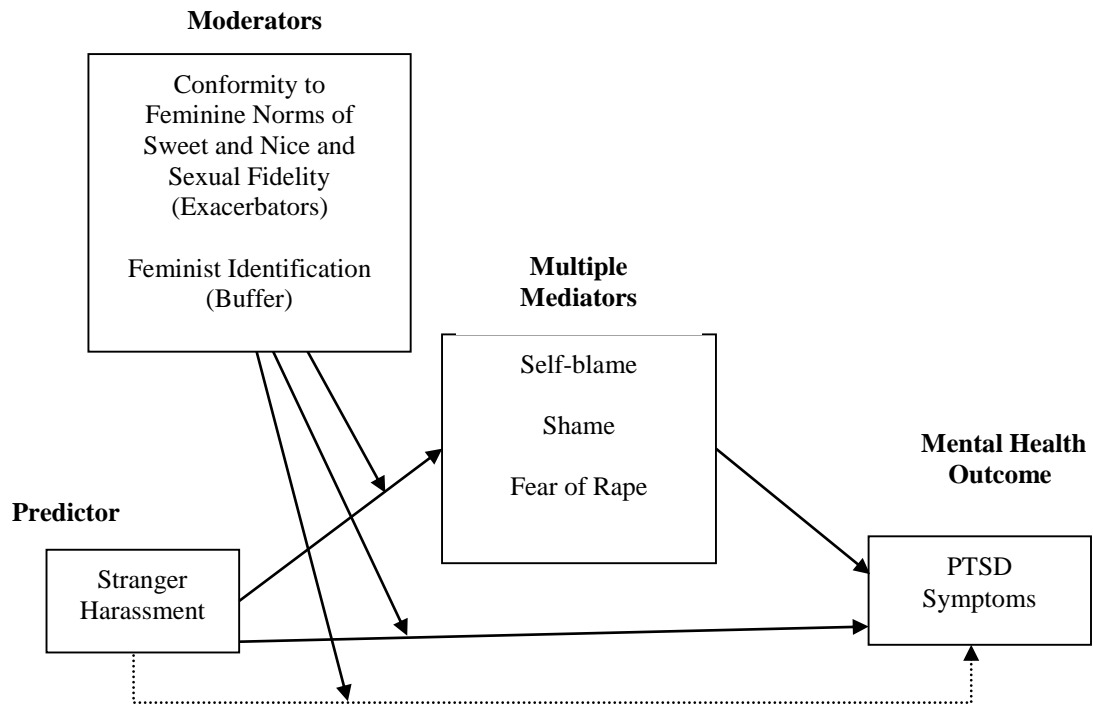


Figure 1. Theorized moderated mediation model. Dashed line indicates conditional indirect effect.



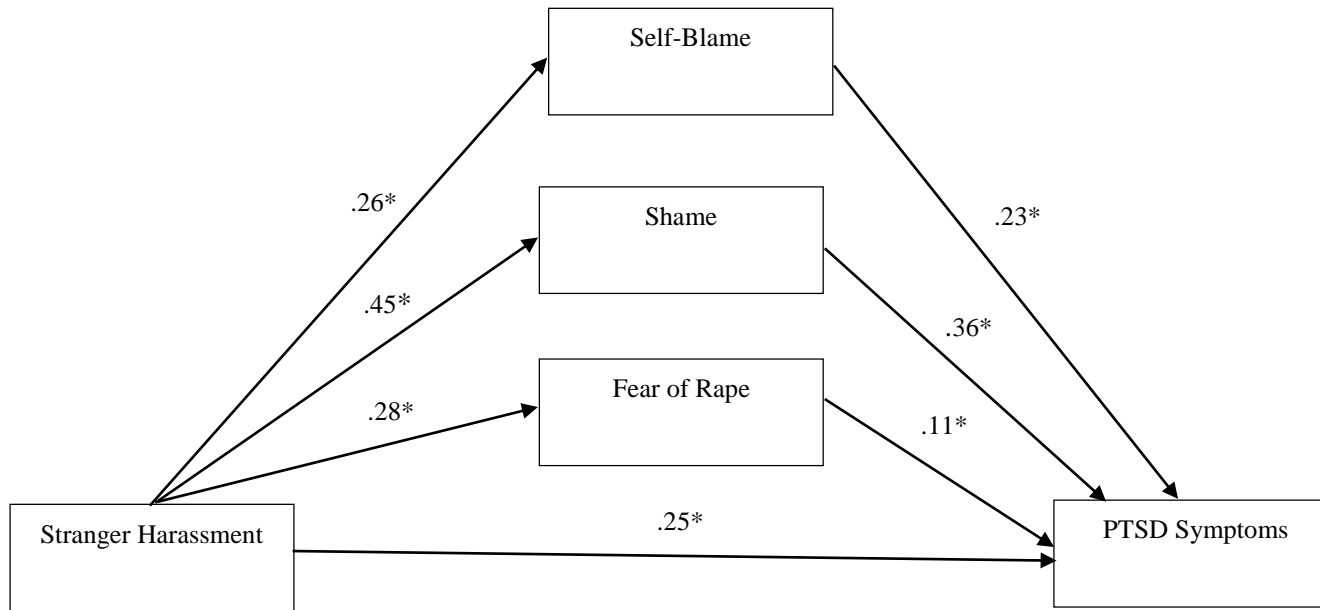


Figure 2. Path model of direct and indirect relations of variables of interest predicting PTSD symptoms. Values reflect standardized coefficients. \*  $p < .05$ .

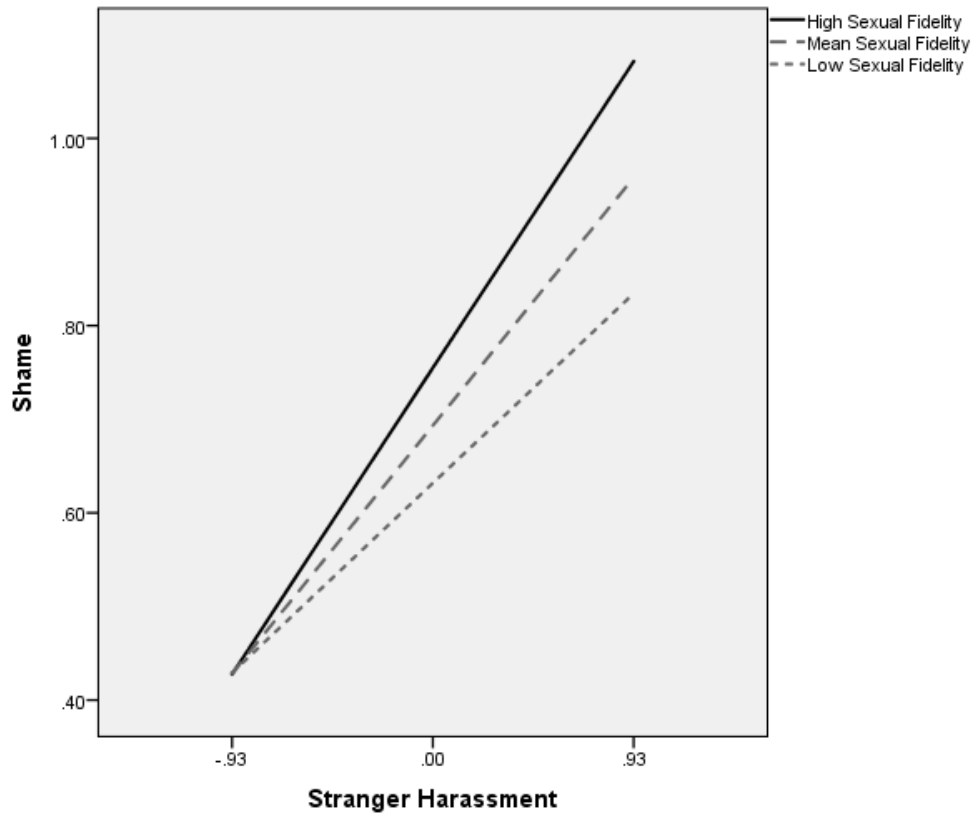


Figure 3. Interaction of stranger harassment and sexual fidelity on shame

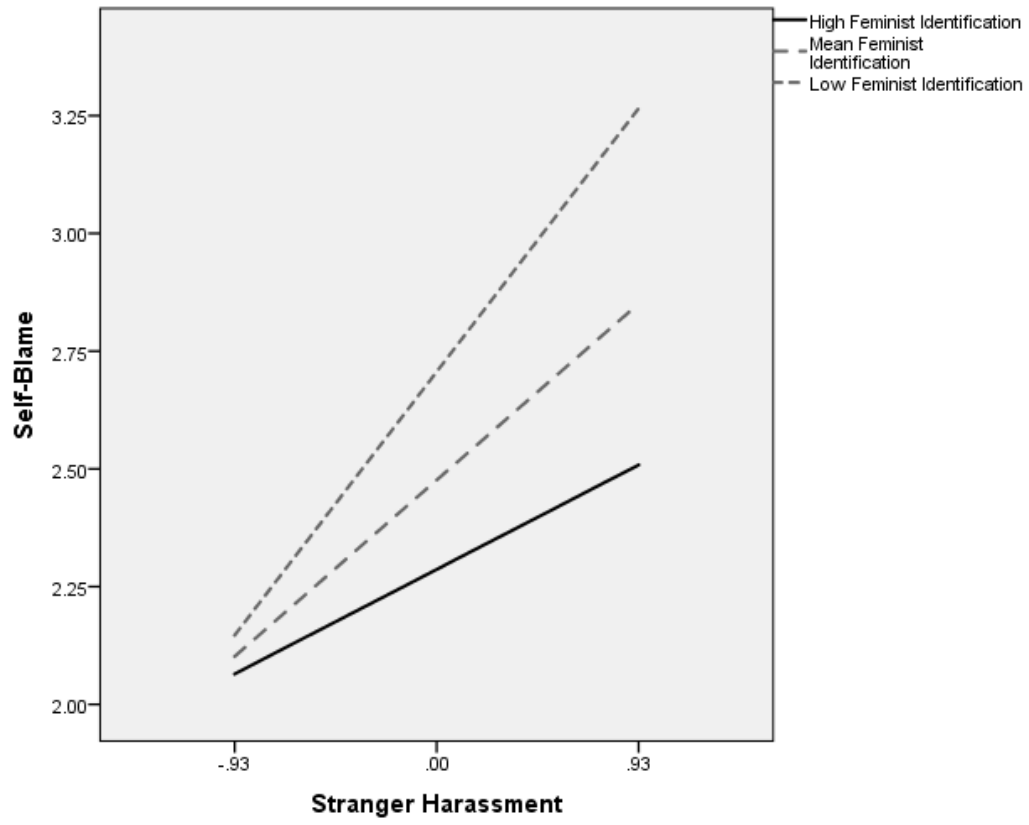


Figure 4. Interaction of stranger harassment and feminist identification on self-blame

Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for All Study Variables*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Stranger Harassment	1.47	.93	---						
2. Self-Blame	2.43	1.31	.26*	---					
3. Shame	.68	.55	.45*	.53*	---				
4. Fear of Rape	2.51	.78	.28*	.27*	.50*	---			
5. Sweet and Nice	3.12	.55	.03	.26*	.19*	.14*	---		
6. Sexual Fidelity	2.34	.94	-.24*	.00	-.02	.02	.22*	---	
7. Feminist Identification	4.11	1.08	.23*	-.07	.14*	.16*	-.07	-.45*	---
8. PTSD	1.45	.87	.50*	.51*	.64*	.42*	.15*	-.06	.07

\*  $p < .05$

Table 2

*Test of Sweet and Nice as a Moderator of the Predictor-Mediator and Predictor-Criterion Links*

Predictor variable	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>
Mediator: Self-Blame						
Stranger Harassment	.36	.26	5.23*	.13	18.54*	3, 363
Sweet and Nice	.60	.25	5.18*			
Stranger Harassment X Sweet and Nice	-.07	-.03	-.59			
Mediator: Shame						
Stranger Harassment	.27	.44	9.68*	.24	37.52*	3, 363
Sweet and Nice	.18	.18	3.87*			
Stranger Harassment X Sweet and Nice	.04	.04	.88			
Mediator: Fear of Rape						
Stranger Harassment	.23	.28	5.56*	.10	12.93*	3, 363
Sweet and Nice	.19	.13	2.65*			
Stranger Harassment X Sweet and Nice	-.05	-.03	-.67			
Criterion: PTSD						
Stranger Harassment	.23	.25	5.92*	.51	63.09*	6, 360
Self-Blame	.15	.22	5.06*			
Shame	.56	.36	6.98*			
Fear of Rape	.13	.11	2.63*			
Sweet and Nice	.01	.01	.15			
Stranger Harassment X Sweet and Nice	-.00	-.00	-.03			

Note. *B*,  $\beta$  and *t* reflects values from the final regression equation; \*  $p < .05$

Table 3

*Test of Sexual Fidelity as a Moderator of the Predictor-Mediator and Predictor-Criterion Links*

Predictor variable	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>
Mediator: Self-Blame						
Stranger Harassment	.40	.28	5.43*	.08	10.04*	3, 363
Sexual Fidelity	.12	.08	1.56*			
Stranger Harassment X Sexual Fidelity	.09	.06	1.12			
Mediator: Shame						
Stranger Harassment	.29	.48	10.02*	.22	34.61*	3, 363
Sexual Fidelity	.07	.11	2.29*			
Stranger Harassment X Sexual Fidelity	.07	.11	2.38*			
Mediator: Fear of Rape						
Stranger Harassment	.25	.30	5.82*	.09	11.41*	3, 363
Sexual Fidelity	.07	.09	1.70			
Stranger Harassment X Sexual Fidelity	.00	.00	-.09			
Criterion: PTSD						
Stranger Harassment	.24	.25	5.84*	.51	63.30*	6, 360
Self-Blame	.15	.22	5.19*			
Shame	.56	.35	6.86*			
Fear of Rape	.13	.12	2.68*			
Sexual Fidelity	.02	.02	.43			
Stranger Harassment X Sexual Fidelity	.03	.03	.75			

Note. *B*,  $\beta$  and *t* reflects values from the final regression equation; \*  $p < .05$

Table 4

*Test of Feminist Identification as a Moderator of the Predictor-Mediator and Predictor-Criterion Links*

Predictor variable	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>
Mediator: Self-Blame						
Stranger Harassment	.40	.29	5.58*	.11	14.62*	3, 363
Feminist Identification	-.21	-.18	-3.33*			
Stranger Harassment X Feminist Identification	-.18	-.15	-2.95*			
Mediator: Shame						
Stranger Harassment	.26	.44	9.14*	.20	31.13*	3, 363
Feminist Identification	.01	.03	.52			
Stranger Harassment X Feminist Identification	-.02	-.03	-.66			
Mediator: Fear of Rape						
Stranger Harassment	.22	.26	5.06*	.09	11.89*	3, 363
Feminist Identification	.08	.11	2.04*			
Stranger Harassment X Feminist Identification	.04	.05	.94			
Criterion: PTSD						
Stranger Harassment	.24	.26	6.07*	.52	64.09*	6, 360
Self-Blame	.15	.23	5.10*			
Shame	.57	.36	7.10*			
Fear of Rape	.13	.11	2.64*			
Feminist Identification	-.02	-.03	-.64			
Stranger Harassment X Feminist Identification	.04	.05	1.36			

*Note.* *B*,  $\beta$  and *t* reflects values from the final regression equation; \*  $p < .05$

## Vita

Rachel Carretta was born in Washington D.C., but moved to New Jersey at a young age and raised in the town of Morris Plains. She attended college at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where she discovered her love of psychology and gender/sexuality studies. Following earning her Bachelors of Arts in Psychology and LGBTQ Sexuality Studies, Rachel applied to psychology doctoral programs in order to pursue her interests in mental health and social justice. She currently is working toward a doctorate degree in Counseling Psychology at the University of Tennessee. Following graduation, she hopes to work as a psychotherapist with individuals struggling with addiction, and women in particular.