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**The Effects of a Narrative Intervention on Gender Attitudes in Students at a Christian
University: A Study on Narrative Persuasion**

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HNRS 4460: Honors Thesis

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Abstract

This study analyzes how identification, empathy, and perspective-taking influence prejudiced attitudes towards women. Through utilizing a narrative intervention alongside measures of prejudiced attitudes, empathetic capacity, and narrative identification, this study documents how students at a Christian university in the southern United States ($n = 100$) responded to narrative persuasion. While analyses revealed that the narrative intervention was ineffective in significantly affecting prejudiced attitudes towards women, participants' empathy levels were positively correlated with character identification, further elucidating the process of perspective-taking. Despite some non-significant results, this study sheds light on the role of narrative persuasion on students at a Christian university and points to future research on the development of interventions aimed at mitigating prejudiced attitudes within this specific demographic.

Keywords: narrative, identification, empathy, perspective-taking, narrative persuasion

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The Effects of a Narrative Intervention on Gender Attitudes in Students at a Christian University: A Study on Narrative Persuasion

Stories weave throughout our lives. We learn through nursery rhymes and storybooks in our formative years. We grow through imitating our favorite characters in books and movies and by listening to the stories swapped around dinner tables and cafeterias. Constructing our realities and documenting our experiences, stories teach us, help us develop our identities, and allow us to communicate with those around us (Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2004; McAdams, 2011; Hallford & Mellor, 2017).

Because narratives are an integral part of how we make sense of and engage with the world, sharing stories can lead to “perspective-taking, empathy, critical thinking, and nuanced ways of understanding” those around us (Godsil & Goodale, 2013, pp. 2-3). However, the narratives we construct can also cause disconnection, stereotyping, and prejudice (Godsil & Goodale, 2013). The stories we tell about the groups we identify with often constrain our attitudes and behaviors, but research has shown that they can be broadened, restructured, and altered through new experiences or deliberate inner work, resulting in healthier patterns of connection with others (Hogg et al., 1995). Better understanding how narratives shape the ways in which we relate to ourselves and the world around us can offer a valuable path to reconstructing the negative social schemas that contribute to disconnection and prejudice.

Reconstructing negative social schemas may depend upon developing interventions that target these narratives directly. More research is needed to develop interventions to reduce bias and negative social attitudes, specifically interventions to reduce sexism (Becker et al., 2014). Traditionally, sexism can be defined as “individuals’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and organizational, institutional, and cultural practices that either reflect negative assessments of

individuals based upon their gender or support unequal status of women and men” (Becker et al., 2014, p. 603). Modern sexism, which we are more likely to encounter today, “represents a form of prejudice in which people reject that discrimination exists, react negatively to such claims, and resist efforts to reduce inequality” of men and women (Cunningham & Melton, 2013, p. 401). Therefore, confronting modern sexism through “short-term” or “spontaneous response[s]” may not be as effective as “planned interventions to reduce sexism” (Becker et al., 2014, p. 604). Dismantling modern sexism requires interventions that challenge the source of our inattentive and biased schemas: the stories we tell about ourselves and others.

In addition, creating an effective intervention that reduces prejudiced attitudes is more effective when developed for “a certain group of people with the defined goal of changing individuals’ endorsement of sexist beliefs and respective behaviors” (Becker et al., 2014, p. 604). Effective interventions require understanding the psychosocial narrative identities engaging in prejudiced attitudes. Interventions that target the underlying narratives informing sexist attitudes are most effective in reducing these specific, prejudiced social schemas. In an effort to contribute to the need for effective, diverse interventions to combat sexism, the current study explores how a specific population, students at a Christian university in the southern United States, respond to a narrative intervention developed to reduce sexist attitudes. Analyzing how this specific group of individuals is affected by narrative persuasion contributes to existing narrative research and better elucidates paths for future interventions to reduce sexist attitudes in this demographic. Although narrative persuasion has been well documented as a persuasive technique for some prejudiced attitudes, few studies have examined the role of perspective-taking, such as empathy and identification with a character, on promoting awareness of gender discrimination and reducing overall sexist attitudes. Through measuring participants’ levels of empathy,

identification with characters in a short narrative intervention, and sexist attitudes towards women, this study expands and replicates previous research on narrative persuasion, bringing forward new ways of understanding and affecting sexist attitudes in students at a Christian university.

Literature Review

Current research emphasizes a process-based approach to developing empathetic connection and reducing prejudiced disconnection. Viewing patterns of connection and disconnection through the lenses of our dynamic personal narratives and perspective-taking skills as opposed to static relationships based on demographics is essential for developing effective interventions to reduce prejudiced attitudes. Social demographics, or social identifications, may set the boundaries or predict the initial structure of the stories we tell about the world, but through the process-based approaches of perspective-taking and narrative persuasion, previous research suggests that prejudiced attitudes can be altered as personal narratives are broadened to incorporate more diverse views.

Narratives

Narrative Identity

We engage with the world and each other through stories in part because of how our brains naturally contextualize and create meaning out of incoming stimuli and sensory inputs. According to Godsil and Goodale (2013), “stories or, more formally, narratives involve a distinct way of thinking” which we use to create “categories (schema) into which we store and organize” our experiences (p. 2). These unique, autobiographical narratives create meaning in our lives and provide a framework for our developing identities.

Both internally and socially constructed, our identity develops and follows the evolving pattern of a story (McAdams, 2011; Hallford & Mellor, 2017; Adler, 2012). This narrative identity is a “selective reconstruction of the autobiographical past and a narrative anticipation of the imagined future that serves to explain, for the self and others, how the person came to be and where his or her life may be going” (McAdams, 2011, p. 99). Imaginative and integrative, narrative identities shape life experiences into a story that conveys “multiplicity as well as unity in the self,” “important developmental process[es],” and the “social relationships, communities of discourse, and culture” that provide context to our stories (McAdams, 2011, p. 104). Personal narratives are factual, autobiographical accounts that are established through orienting and understanding one’s experiences in terms of time, place, “causal associations,” and “unifying themes” (Hallford & Mellor, 2017, p. 399). Through these narratives we construct, simplify, group, and categorize the world around us according to the “biological, psychological, ideological, economic, historical, and cultural realities” that constrain our experiences (McAdams, 2011, p. 107). This “co-authored, psychosocial construction” provides “unity, purpose, meaning, ... an instrumental explanation of a person’s most important commitments in the realms of work and love, and a moral justification of who a person was, is, and will be” (McAdams, 2011, pp. 100, 112). Our narrative identities extend beyond simple social identifications, such as our gender, race, or class, and encompass our values, ideology, and purpose. Offering a cohesive explanation of our morals and philosophies, narrative identities inform our attitudes and behaviors.

We begin synthesizing and developing our narrative identities in “late-adolescent and emerging adult years, but the work never really finishes” (McAdams, 2011, p. 100). Narrative construction is an ongoing process that gets “increasingly sophisticated and nuanced” as the self

“develops from an actor to an agent to an author” (McAdams, 2011, p. 103). Challenging and broadening our narrative identities is possible throughout our lifetimes; however, it may be most effective during emerging adulthood when our narrative identities are beginning to be synthesized. Broadening our narrative identities creates space for alternative meaning and differing viewpoints which in turn can increase concern for outgroups and decrease prejudice. One way to shift the boundaries of our narratives is to expose ourselves to alternative stories.

Narrative Expansion

Stories, perhaps because of our own narrative identities, are important for our growth “not only because they engage our attention, but because...[they create] meaning” (Godsil & Goodale, 2013, p. 3). They show us what is “true, possible, and ideal” and help develop our “world view and the values we hold sacred” (Godsil & Goodale, 2013, p. 3). In the absence of mental flexibility or concrete experience, stories allow us to simulate the thoughts of others, gain a first-person access to another’s experience, and empathetically engage with the perspectives of our demographic and ideological outgroups. Through empathy and identification, readers “socially” interact with a text and impart their own characteristics upon it and acquire new schemata through its story (Oatley, 1994).

Engaging with narratives, especially narratives that immerse readers in a fictional world, can lead to improved social cognition (Nunning, 2015). Social cognition involves perceiving and predicting the actions or thoughts of other people, and it can help individuals better understand others’ behaviors. If narratives can improve readers’ social cognition by allowing them to enter into the thoughts of others, a narrative intervention could be effective in increasing empathy and understanding towards readers’ outgroups. Because narratives can arouse different emotions through their structure and discourse and prompt self-reflection through “mimetic” (simulative)

experiences (Oatley, 1994), it follows that increased interpersonal skills and a better understanding of other people's "emotions, intentions, thoughts, and actions" can arise from reading narratives, especially more literary narratives that fully immerse readers into the perspectives of others (Nunning, 2015).

Perspective-Taking

The improved social cognition that comes from reading immersive narratives relies on perspective-taking, a form of interpersonal contact. Narrative expansion through perspective-taking challenges prejudice by addressing the entire self, encompassing the diverse social identifications and values that promote in-group solidarity and out-group prejudice.

According to Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, as quoted in Cunningham and Melton (2013), "interacting with people different from the self should reduce bias expressed toward that group" (p. 402). Empirically, the "value of contact in reducing prejudice is impressive" (Cunningham & Melton, 2013, p. 402). Research shows that individuals who "spend more time with dissimilar others...learn more about the out-group, develop empathy for them, and become less anxious during their interactions" (Cunningham & Melton, 2013, p. 402). However, for gender prejudice specifically, intergroup contact alone does not always result in decreased intergroup anxiety since "women and men are in continuous close contact" (Becker et al., 2014, p. 607). Unfamiliarity, at least at the level of exposure, cannot be a cause of intergroup anxiety between women and men, and interventions that create an intergroup contact situation "tend to occur in ways that reproduce individuals' status outside that situation" where there is often "a subtle expression of male dominance" (Becker et al., 2014, p. 607). Therefore, interventions that facilitate perspective-taking, "or putting oneself in the shoes of another," instead of intergroup

contact may be more effective in reducing intergroup anxiety and decreasing prejudiced attitudes towards women (Inzlicht et al., 2012, p. 364).

The Role of Attitudes in Perspective-Taking

Following a process-based approach to attitudes and identity, the maintenance of prejudice is nuanced by certain salient factors in the development of our personal narratives. Some of these factors are the social identifications of age, race, gender, and socio-economic status. These factors can predict how we automatically identify with or label others, and they are often correlated with patterns of connection or prejudice (Brown & Henriquez, 2008, p. 199). While these more dichotomous social identifications can be predictive of people's less accepting attitudes towards those outside of their demographics, previous research suggests prejudice more often arises in response to value-conflicts when religious, political, or philosophical ideology is perceived to be dissimilar (Brown & Henriquez, 2008; Chambers et al., 2013; Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2015). Specifically, in this study, understanding how value-conflicts influence perspective-taking is essential for analyzing how students from a Christian University in a largely politically conservative area of the southern United States might interact with a narrative intervention that challenges modern sexism.

Religion and political ideology permeate our personal narratives and shape our grouping behaviors and attitudes. Religion by itself can be a "particularly powerful narrative," but previous research has shown that Christianity in the United States manifests itself differently in individuals' values and attitudes based upon their political conservatism or liberalism (Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2015, p. 204). McAdams (2011) found that "among highly religious American Christians, political conservatives tend to privilege life-narrative scenes that highlight strict authority, personal discipline, and the purity of the self whereas politically liberal Christians tend

to tell stories of empathetic caregiving and self-expression” (p. 102). For example, it has been demonstrated that conservative personal narratives tend to rely on “system-justification,” where individuals are “motivated to defend the status quo, and that groups (e.g., African Americans) seeking social change and reform are therefore regarded as threatening” (Chambers et al., 2013, p. 140). Individualism and self-reliance, two core values of political conservatism, develop into the beliefs that “better outcomes go to people who work harder and that rewards should match one's contributions (i.e., equity)” and that “individuals and private institutions” are the best avenues for caring and protecting those in need (Chambers et al., 2013, pp. 140-141).

Conversely, a belief in “the power of the situation,” a value held by many politically liberal individuals, leads one to attribute systemic pressure to the disadvantaged states of specific groups (Chambers et al., 2013, p. 141). .

These underlying personal narratives may explain the somewhat contradictory findings in current research on how religion affects individuals' empathetic responses towards the disadvantaged. Some research suggests that religious beliefs “engender compassion towards the unfortunate” and breed “values like solidarity, altruism, and charity, which in turn increases positive feelings toward the disadvantaged” (Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2015, p. 203). However, other research has connected religious ideology to intolerance and prejudice (Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2015, p. 203). Therefore, the notion that religion engenders compassion is not universal (Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2015, p. 205). In fact, like many of the other social identifications undergirding our personal narratives, religion seems to increase empathy and prosocial tendencies towards ingroup members rather than outgroup members (Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2015, p. 205). However, intentional, other-oriented perspective-taking may provide an avenue for participants to directly engage with the narratives of their outgroups and increase empathy and

prosocial tendencies towards disadvantaged others. As a whole, all personal narratives, regardless of the religious or political values shaping them, can lead to prejudice and disconnection by creating boundaries between groups. Reducing prejudice requires interventions that directly interact with these underlying narratives by broadening boundaries and increasing perspective-taking.

The Role of Empathy in Perspective-Taking

Previous research has demonstrated that a perspective-taking connection is often effective in decreasing prejudice towards those with different values and socio-demographic backgrounds (Inzlicht et al., 2012, p. 363). In order for it to be effective, this type of intentional self-other overlap must involve both empathetic and cognitive processes.

Empathy is an imaginative process where an individual simulates someone else's cognition, affect, or behavior while still maintaining "clear self-other differentiation" (Coplan, 2011, p. 58). Neurologically, empathy and perspective-taking both activate mirror neurons and similar neural pathways (Inzlicht et al., 2012). Some research suggests that empathy involves bottom-up processes, such as emotional contagion and memory, and top-down processes such as intentional, other-oriented perspective-taking (Coplan, 2011). Because humans are "empathetic animals," our brains automatically match others' "motor and autonomic responses" alongside our "own neural representations of that behavior," allowing us to intimately understand others' emotions and needs (Inzlicht et al., 2012, p. 361).

Despite our innate ability to empathize and take the perspectives of those around us, this capacity is limited by "social factors, most notably attitude and group membership" (Inzlicht et al., 2012, p. 361). We are less likely to automatically empathize with those who belong in our ideological or demographic outgroups (Inzlicht et al., 2012). Since this hesitancy to empathize

with those in our outgroups contributes to and maintains prejudice, interventions that increase empathy and perspective-taking for outgroup members may reduce prejudice. Narratives that provide spaces for readers to engage in empathetic connection with their outgroups should result in attitude changes as readers' personal narratives are broadened. It follows that participants in this study who possess higher levels of empathy should be able to engage more deeply with the narrative intervention and should report decreased levels of prejudiced attitudes towards women as the boundaries of their personal narratives are widened by the fictional characters within the narrative.

There is some conflicting research on the role of empathy in changing prejudiced attitudes. Inzlicht et al. (2012) found that "mimicking outgroup members reduces implicit bias against that outgroup" (p. 363). However, some research asserts that mimicking the outgroup through empathetic perspective-taking reduces "consciously reportable prejudice" which is a result that has also been demonstrated in observation studies (Inzlicht et al., 2012, p. 364). This raises the concern that mimicry and observation might not reduce prejudice but may instead affect awareness of self-presentation (Inzlicht et al., 2012, p. 364). While empathy through perspective-taking may not be a guaranteed way to ameliorate prejudice, it may be a way to move past our own narratives and allow alternative stories to influence our attitudes.

The Role of Identification in Perspective-Taking

The process of identification plays an important role in integrating stories into our personal narratives. Identification is a mechanism through which individuals experience a text "from the inside, as if the events were happening to them" (Cohen, 2001, p. 245). It is an active process, unlike "an attitude, an emotion, or perception," that replaces self-awareness with "heightened emotional and cognitive connections with a character" (Cohen, 2001, p. 251).

Working both cognitively and emotionally, identification allows individuals to imagine themselves as a character in a text which makes it possible for readers to engage in perspective-taking (Nunning, 2015; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010; Cohen et al., 2018). The process of identification facilitates perspective-taking by leading readers to “adopt a character’s perspective,” increase their “fondness for a specific character,” and realize “that a similarity exists between” themselves and that character (Cohen, 2001, p. 252). In addition, identifying with a character encourages readers to internalize that character’s point of view or goals (Cohen, 2001, p. 252). Through this process of identification and internalization of a character’s perspective, it has been demonstrated that readers’ attitudes are likely to become reinforced or altered as a consequence of engaging with a narrative (de Graaf et al., 2012).

Surprisingly, the attitude changes that arise from narrative identification do not always depend on similarity between characters and readers. While several studies have found that individuals identify with characters with whom they share similar social identifications (Cohen et al., 2018; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010), others have found that the story’s perspective (i.e. the protagonist) may influence readers’ identifications even more than social identifications (Hoeken et al., 2016). For example, regardless of whether or not the protagonist was in a different field of study or occupation, one study found that readers exhibited more patterns of identification with the protagonist than an antagonist who was more similar to the readers’ backgrounds (Hoeken et al., 2016). A similar study revealed that participants strongly identified with a story’s protagonist over its antagonist even when the attitude held by the protagonist was unfavorable to the reader (Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014, p. 95). For example, Hoeken and Fikkers (2014) found that after “reading a story in which the protagonist makes a case for” raising college tuition, college students held a “positive attitude toward the issue,” even though the students in the control

condition were strongly against the raise (p. 95). Research has consistently demonstrated that protagonists' actions and perspectives can "prime" readers to behave in ways that would traditionally be incongruent with their typical behavior (Appel, 2011; Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014). The close connection between a reader and a protagonist, even an extreme, dissimilar protagonist, can lead to a change in the reader's behavior and cognitive performance. Although similarity between a character and a reader is not necessary for narrative persuasion to occur, similarity may make narrative identification and perspective-taking easier. When a character is similar to a reader, either demographically or ideologically, it requires less mental flexibility and cognitive effort for the reader to simulate the character's thoughts and feelings (Coplan, 2011). By freeing up the reader's cognitive load, character similarity could increase the speed or ease of narrative identification, especially in shorter, less literary popular fiction, like the narrative used in this study. It has been demonstrated that similarity between readers and characters is often less important for identification and perspective-taking in longer, more literary narratives.

One reason similarity might not be important for character identification is the inherent transportability of narratives. Through transporting readers to an alternative reality, fictional narratives decrease the importance of ingroup and outgroup similarity between readers and characters (Cohen, 2001; Cohen et al., 2018). Readers enter into the imaginary worlds of narratives and are provided with a specific context and setting that primes "certain social and personal attributes" within them (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 510). Because relevant attributes in readers are drawn out through the narrative's context, varying levels of demographic or ideological similarity between readers and characters can result in identification and narrative persuasion (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 522). Research has shown that the transportability of narratives to "alternative story worlds" makes our social realities much less important than in

“interpersonal contact or expository persuasive messages” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 523).

Therefore, the similarity required for effective intergroup contact and traditional perspective-taking may not be necessary for narrative persuasion (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 523).

Narrative identification, with or without character similarity, is an incredibly useful persuasive tool. Through “introducing other perspectives and persuading others to identify with them, new possibilities for understanding are opened,” and the “natural tendency to limit one’s thoughts and feelings to a single perspective” is overcome (Cohen, 2001, p. 260). Existing research on narrative identity demonstrates that, for the purposes of the current study, regardless of the ideological or demographic characteristics of the reader, identifying with a female character experiencing gender discrimination in the workplace may be effective in challenging prejudiced gender attitudes and supporting social reform.

Narrative Persuasion

Narratives, through identification, empathy, and perspective-taking, can cause readers’ emotional understanding to be extended and their attitudes to be persuaded (Oatley, 1994). Previous research suggests that a narrative’s persuasive impact has less to do with its logic or content but more to do with its emotionality and immersive transportability (Appel, 2011; Mazzocco et al., 2010). Narratives are unique in that even when their rhetorical or logical arguments fall flat, their emotionality is still persuasive (Mazzocco et al., 2010).

Narrative transportability creates “emotional rather than rational responses” that activate empathetic processes and increase the power of perspective-taking and attitudinal change even for highly sensitive issues (Mazzocco et al., 2010, p. 366). Rhetorical messages that rely on rational responses or overt messages of persuasion often threaten individuals’ own values or opinions and decrease the overall effectiveness of the persuasive message (Mazzocco et al.,

2010; Hoeken & Fijkers, 2014). When overt, rhetorical messages impinge upon individuals' values, they become more guarded and "resistant to attitude change" (Hoeken & Fijkers, 2014, p. 87). Comparatively, narratives are less likely to "evoke reactance" and "raise counter-arguments" (Hoeken & Fijkers, 2014, p. 87). When readers enter into a narrative, they are less likely to be engaged in issue-relevant thinking and "are prepared to go along with a character's assertions, opinions, and the events in the story world" (Hoeken & Fijkers, 2014, p. 87). Therefore, it is not so much about the particular message the narrative conveys, but rather how the message is conveyed that makes a narrative persuasive.

Other structural aspects of narratives contribute to their persuasiveness. Structurally, narratives are an efficient method of conveying information since they provide readers with a setting that situates information in a "relatable venue" which does not require readers to expend "time or mental energy constructing a setting" or inferring meaning from "a series of unrelated facts" (Godsil & Goodale, 2013, p. 8). When reading narratives, readers also exert "more cognitive effort" and pay closer attention to details than they do when reading factual statements (Nunning, 2015, p. 54). This may be because readers seem "implicitly aware of the fact that, when reading fiction, things might turn out to be different than was assumed initially" or it could be that readers simply pay more attention to "the words, the style and the language" of narratives as opposed to factual statements (Nunning, 2015, p. 54). Through narratives, readers are also given deeper opportunities for knowledge acquisition and perspective-taking (de Graaf et al., 2012; Mazzocco et al., 2010). Stories provide readers with the opportunity to "simulate the thoughts" of dissimilar characters, broadening their own personal experiences by gaining a first-person perspective to another's thoughts (Nunning, 2015, p. 51). This type of perspective-taking is unique to narratives and increases the persuasive power of stories.

However, some narratives fall short of their persuasive power depending on the issue they are attempting to challenge. This is because it is difficult, if not impossible, for individuals' to "acknowledge two stories simultaneously;" thus, "one of those stories must be rejected," and it is often the one "that threatens the dominant view" (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 336). For example, at an ideological level, the narrative of meritocracy, which states that "hard work and determination is rewarded with material successes," cannot coexist with the narratives "of those who worked hard but did not enjoy success" (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 336). Persuasive attempts to influence these conflicting narratives not only have to address the societal structures upholding these stories, but they also have to acknowledge the ways in which these narratives are exercising power over individuals' personal narratives (McLean & Syed, 2015).

The Effect of Narrative Persuasion on Gender Narratives

This persuasive challenge is especially apparent in narratives about gender. Dominant gender narratives in the U.S. contain "competing narratives (i.e., traditional gender roles and equality)" which suggest malleability in the culture at large but perhaps still reflect difficulty in persuading individuals due to power dynamics, historical persistence, and biological constraints (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 340). McLean and Syed (2015) have found that "the longer a story has been told, the more normative it seems, the more developmentally rooted it is in a person and in a culture" (p. 341). In addition, there are "biological constraints to changing the [gender] narrative in ways that create equality" so long as "equality is defined by 'sameness'" (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 341). Through giving shape to new possibilities and increasing perspective-taking with ideological outgroups, perhaps narratives can create a new "stable structure" of gender equality that will allow individuals to challenge existing power dynamics, culturally progress,

and define new language that reflects equality despite biological difference (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 341).

Current Study

The present study sought to build on the existing framework of narrative research through challenging prejudiced attitudes towards women. While narratives have been demonstrated to be inherently persuasive, and perspective-taking has been shown to be effective in reducing prejudice, more research is needed to explore if narrative interventions can be a reliable method of prejudice reduction. In addition, research on interventions to reduce sexism is rare, and there are few, if any, examples of empirical research on the effects of a narrative, perspective-taking intervention to reduce sexist attitudes (Becker et al., 2014). The current study's exploration of the effects of a narrative intervention on prejudiced attitudes may engage directly with the underlying narratives informing these attitudes and may be more effective than interventions that focus on intergroup contact (Inzlicht et al., 2012, p. 364). Few studies have also examined the roles of empathy and identification on promoting awareness of gender discrimination and reducing overall sexist attitudes. Weaving together the processes of empathy, identification, and perspective-taking, this study utilized the inherent persuasiveness and emotionality within narratives to produce changes in participants' attitudes towards women.

A narrative intervention was employed in a between-subjects experimental design to deepen participants' awareness of gender discrimination and modern sexism in an effort to decrease sexist attitudes. Specifically, this study tested the following hypotheses:

H1: Participants who report higher levels of empathy will identify more with the main character in the narrative than those who have low levels of empathy.

H2: There will be a significant change in readers' prejudiced attitudes towards women after reading the experimental narrative. In addition, those with high levels of identification will report more significant changes in their attitudes about gender than those with low identification.

Method

Participants

One hundred undergraduates (72% women, 26% male, and 2% undisclosed) from a private, religiously-affiliated liberal arts university in the southern United States volunteered to participate in this study. Some of the participants volunteered in exchange for course credit in a general psychology course while others responded to social media advertisements and volunteered to be a part of the current study without compensation. The sample consisted of mostly Caucasian (87% Caucasian, 8% Hispanic/Latino, 3% Black/African American, and 2% Asian/Pacific Islander) and Republican (49% Republican, 18% Democratic, 23% Independent, and 10% Other) participants.

Materials

Social Identification Questionnaire

In order to document the relevant social identifications of the sample, participants ($N = 100$) were asked to complete a brief demographic survey created by the author. Salient social identifications such as gender identity (e.g. "Male," "Female," or "Prefer Not to Say") and race and ethnicity (e.g. "American Indian or Alaska Native," "Asian," "Black or African American," "Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander," "Hispanic or Latinx," or "Caucasian") were assessed alongside a question concerning political affiliation (e.g. "Republican," "Democratic," "Independent," or "Other") in a multiple choice survey.

Quick Discrimination Index (QDI)

Participants' attitudes were assessed using a subscale of the Quick Discrimination Index (QDI), a thirty-item self-report scale designed to measure attitudes towards racial minorities and women (Ponterotto et al., 1995). Utilizing a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), the QDI categorizes respondents with higher scores as having more nonracist and nonsexist attitudes and those with lower scores as reflecting more "negative attitudes toward racial minority individuals and women" (Ponterotto et al., 2002, p. 192). The QDI's three subscales measure (1) Cognitive Racial Attitudes (e.g. Item 19, "Overall, I think racial minorities in America complain too much about racial discrimination" [reverse scored item]), (2) Affective Racial Attitudes (e. g. Item 11 "I would feel O.K about my son or daughter dating someone from a different racial group), and (3) Cognitive Gender Attitudes (e. g. Item 2 "It is as easy for women to succeed in business as it is for men" [reverse scored item]) (Ponterotto et al., 2002). Within the current study, only the Cognitive Gender Attitudes subscale was used to measure participants' attitudes. The QDI's content validity was established through focus group analysis and confirmatory factor analyses that yielded a goodness-of-fit index (GFI) of .87 (Ponterotto et al., 2002, p. 198). Further establishing this measure's validity, the Gender Attitudes subscale used in the current study was significantly correlated at the $p < .001$ level with "feminist attitudes [0.39], pro-choice attitudes [0.45], and course work [0.50] and continuing education in women's issues [0.30]" (Ponterotto et al., 2002, pp. 200-202). Test-retest reliability scores for the QDI were gathered from samples of college students, and the Gender Attitudes subscale's reliability was determined to be satisfactory at $r = .81$ (Ponterotto et al., 2002, p. 203). Finally, the QDI's Gender Attitudes subscale utilized in the current study was found to have an internal consistency of $\alpha = .71$.

Possible scores on the Gender Attitudes subscale range from a low of 11 to a high of 44. Although, in a normative sample, scores on the QDI's Gender Attitudes subscale ranged from a low of 29.04 to a high of 36.85 and a mean of 31.90, with lower scores denoting more sexist attitudes (Ponterotto et al., 2002, p. 198). Participants in this study's sample had a mean pre-score on the QDI's Gender Attitudes subscale of 31.94, and all scores ranged from 22.00 to 43.00.

Empathy Quotient (EQ)

The Empathy Quotient (EQ) is an empirical self-report measure used in clinical settings to assess affective empathy in individuals (Lawrence et al., 2004). This study utilizes its short form which consists of thirty-nine questions in a Likert scale format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) with higher scores indicating higher levels of affective empathy (Wakabayashi et al, 2006). It has been demonstrated in previous research to have strong validity and test-retest reliability ($r = .84$), with different clinical applications for its subscales (Lawrence et al., 2004). Significant correlation was found between the EQ's three subscales: cognitive empathy, emotional reactivity, and social skills (Lawrence et al., 2004, p. 915). Moderate correlations were found between the Empathy Quotient (EQ) and other valid constructs of empathy: empathetic concern and perspective-taking ($r = .49$) and emotional reactivity and empathetic concern ($r = .58$) (Lawrence et al., 2004, p. 917). Example questions include: "I find it easy to put myself in somebody else's shoes" and "It is hard for me to see why some things upset people so much [reverse scored item]" (Wakabayashi et al, 2006).

Narrative Intervention

The narrative intervention used in this study consists of two different short stories, a control narrative and an experimental narrative, of similar reading difficulty and length. Both

narratives were written by the author and were gauged to be at a sixth grade reading level (Readability Formulas, n.d.). Following the examples and theoretical framework detailed in de Graaf et al.'s (2012) "Identification as a Mechanism of Narrative Persuasion," these two narratives are told from a first-person perspective in order to simulate perspective-taking in participants. Both narratives follow a protagonist through a work day. In the control condition, which is 503 words, the narrative intervention provided is a neutral story without any gender markers or value-laden statements. The narrative intervention in the experimental condition is 537 words and told from the perspective of a character who identifies as a woman and who encounters workplace discrimination based upon her sex. Its storyline and examples were adapted from the personal narratives of Michelle Zhang (2018) who recounted her experiences of gender discrimination in the workplace in her article "Two Personal Stories on Gender Discrimination." Both narrative interventions include the internal thoughts and perspectives of the main characters which theoretically provide readers with the "first-person access to another" that is essential for an empathetic connection and identification (Coplan, 2011, p. 58; Oatley, 1999; Cohen, 2001). Rather than communicating characters' attitudes and experiences through explicit statements, these narratives included characters' goals and actions, increasing the chance that readers' attitudes are affected (de Graaf et al., 2012).

Table 1

Example of the Control and Experimental Narratives

Control Narrative	Experimental Narrative
Last week we onboarded a new guy to the company, Matt. He's a good worker, but he doesn't know his way around the city or the office yet. My manager wanted me to persuade him to work with us in HR, and he agreed.	Last week we onboarded a new guy to the company, Matt. He's a good worker, but he doesn't know his way around the city or the office yet. My manager wanted me to persuade him to work with us in HR, and he agreed.

I say hi to Matt as I plop down at my desk. We chat for a second as I turn on my computer and get ready to brief him on the goals for the day. As I swivel my chair around to face him, John, the company's Head of Sales, comes by the HR corner, spotting **me and Matt**.

"Working hard or hardly working?" He asks, chuckling as he rounds the corner.

I roll my eyes and shake my head.

"Is he going to do that every day?" Matt asks.

"Probably," I sigh. "If we're lucky, he'll come up with a new phrase around Christmas time just to shake things up."

I say hi to Matt as I plop **my purse** on my desk. We chat for a second as I turn on my computer and get ready to brief him on the goals for the day. **But** as I swivel my chair around to face him, John, the company's Head of Sales, comes by the HR corner, spotting Matt.

"Why are you here?" He cocks his head at Matt, glancing around the HR office with a grimace. "You should really come work with me in sales."

Matt protests, "But it looks like there's some interesting work here..."

"Oh, it's really not that important, you can do so much more in sales," John says, slouching against the doorframe. "You can just throw this work to her." John waves a dismissive hand at me as he walks away.

Note. Bolded portions indicate differences between the Experimental and Control conditions.

Experience-Taking Measure

The Experience-Taking Measure was developed to assess the extent to which readers identify with a character in a narrative and cognitively and affectively simulate his or her experiences, emotions, and aspirations as if they were their own (Kaufman & Libby, 2012).

This measure contains high validity coefficients ($\alpha = .84$) for experience-taking and utilizes a seven item self report survey with each question using a 9-point likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree) (Kaufman & Libby, 2012, p. 5). Each question asks readers to measure the extent they agree with a statement. For example, Item 1 says "I felt like I could put myself in the shoes of the character in the story", and Item 6 states "I was not able to get inside the character's head" [reverse scored] (Kaufman & Libby, 2012).

Procedure

This study was administered online through two google forms. All participants were randomly assigned to either an experimental ($n = 48$) or a control condition ($n = 52$). No

participant screening was necessary for this study; however, before participating in the study, all volunteers were required to read an informed consent form. Upon completing the informed consent, participants responded to a series of questionnaires.

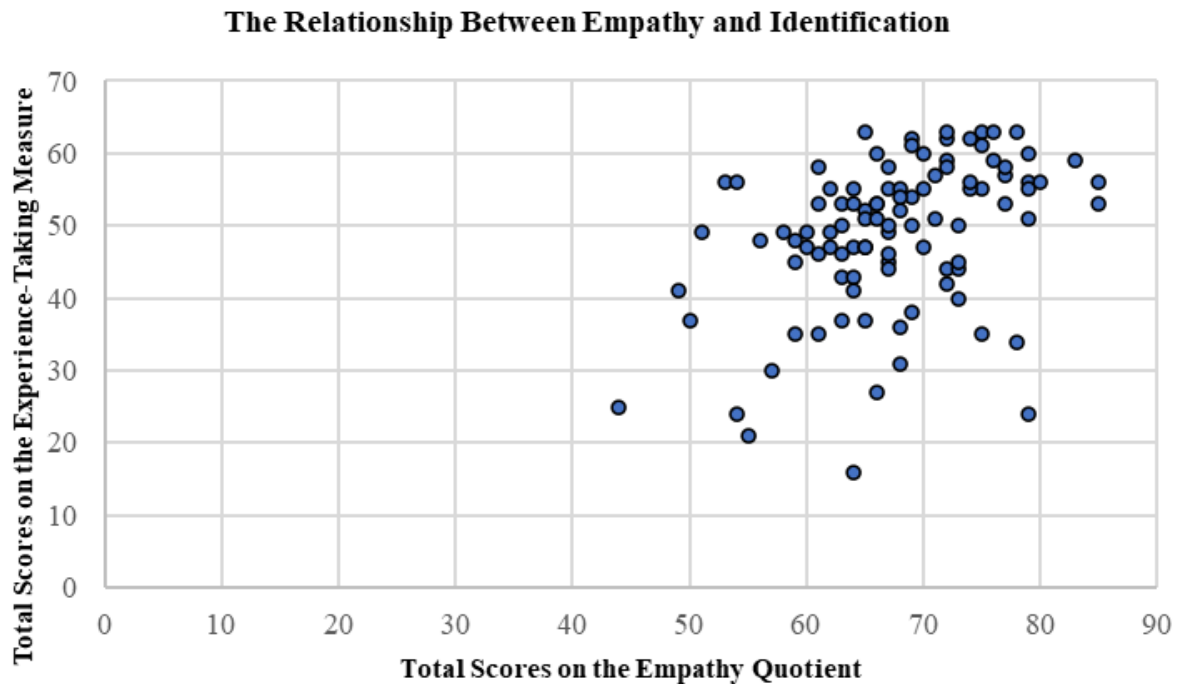
Participants responded to the brief social identifications survey, documenting their gender identity, race and ethnicity and political affiliation. They then completed the Cognitive Gender Attitudes subscale of the Quick Discrimination Index (QDI) to assess their preliminary attitudes about gender. At the end of these baseline measures, participants completed the Empathy Quotient (EQ). Participants in the control condition then read the control narrative while participants in the experimental condition read the experimental narrative about a woman experiencing gender discrimination in a workplace environment. After this narrative intervention, participants in both conditions completed the Experience-Taking Measure to measure their identification with the main character they read about. Finally, all participants completed the Cognitive Gender Attitudes subscale of the QDI again to determine whether the narrative intervention produced any change in participants' attitudes towards gender equity. Following the completion of the study, participants were debriefed.

Results

In order to assess the first hypothesis, *H1: Participants who report higher levels of empathy will identify more with the main character in the narrative than those who have low levels of empathy*, a Pearson correlation coefficient was used, and a moderate correlation was found between participants' scores on the Empathy Quotient and their scores on the Experience-Taking Measure, $r(100) = .40, p < .001$ [see Figure 1].

Figure 1

Scatterplot of Participants' Empathy and Identification Scores



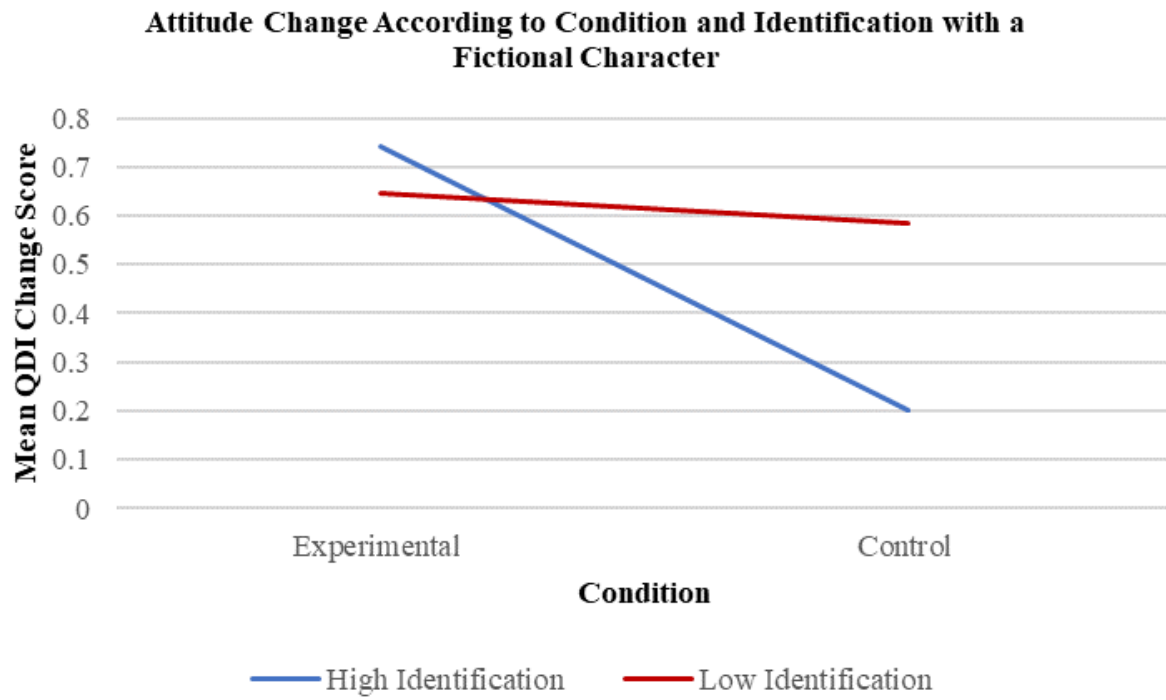
This study found little statistical support for the second hypothesis, *H2: There will be a significant change in readers' prejudiced attitudes towards women after reading the experimental narrative. In addition, those with high levels of identification will report more significant changes in their attitudes about gender than those with low identification.* To determine if reading the experimental narrative resulted in attitude change, participants' change scores on the QDI were calculated by subtracting their pretest scores on the QDI from their posttest scores. These attitude change scores were subjected to a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with two levels of condition (control, experimental) and two levels of identification with a fictional character (high, low) [see Figure 2]. In order to examine participants' identification with a fictional character, a median split was conducted on participants' scores on the Experience-Taking Measure with those scoring 51 or above dichotomized as having High

Identification ($n = 51$) and those scoring 50 or below labeled as experiencing Low Identification ($n = 49$) with a fictional character. Only the intercept was found to be significant at the .05 significance level, $F(3, 96) = 6.50, p = .01, \eta^2 = .06$.

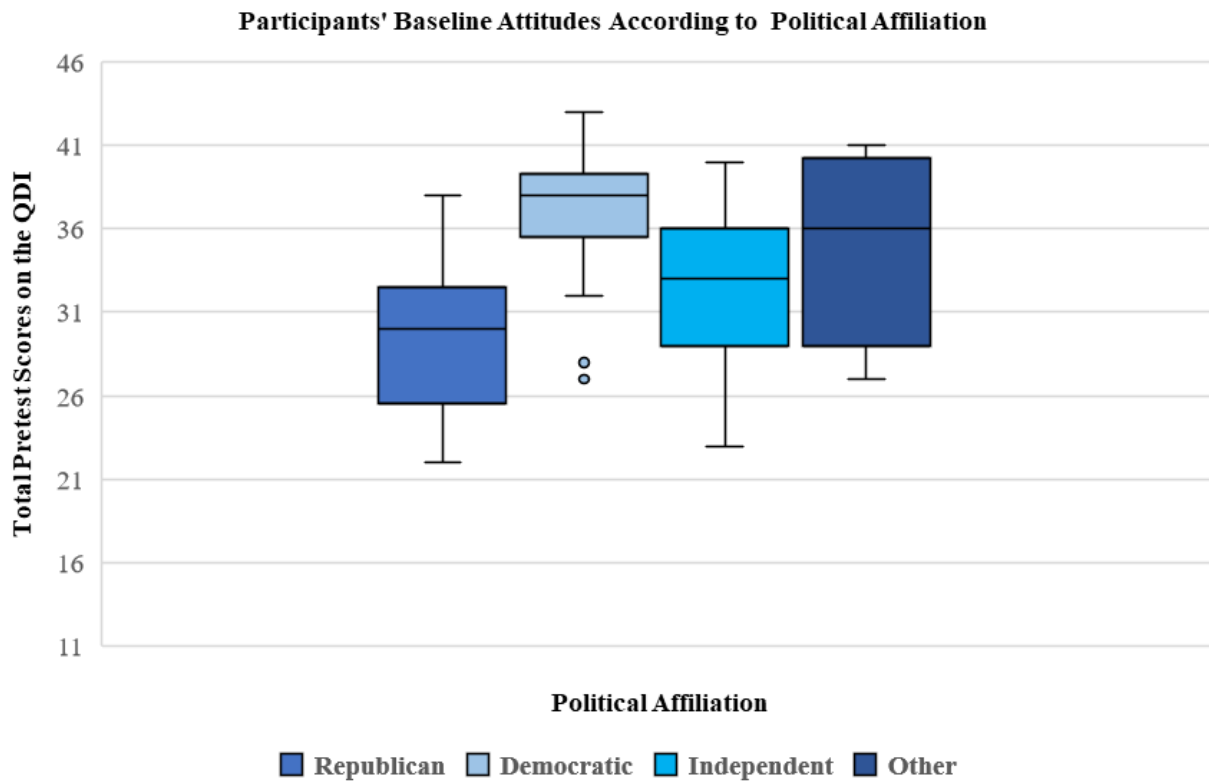
All other main effects and interactions were non-significant at the .05 significance level. The main effect of condition yielded an F ratio of $F(3, 96) = .55, p = .46, \eta^2 = .006$; however, there was a mean difference between the experimental ($MD = .313$) and control conditions ($MD = -.313$) with the experimental condition exhibiting more attitude change on average. Likewise, the main effect of identification on attitude change yielded a non-significant F ratio of $F(3, 96) = .10, p = .75, \eta^2 = .001$ although a mean difference in attitude change scores did exist between those who experienced high identification ($MD = .134$) and low identification ($MD = -.134$). Finally, the interaction between condition and identification on attitude change resulted in a non-significant F ratio of $F(3, 96) = .29, p = .59, \eta^2 = .003$. But, those in the experimental condition with high identification ($n = 31$) reported the greatest change in attitudes across all groups ($M = .74, SD = 2.00$).

Figure 2

Change Scores on the QDI Based Upon Participants' Condition and Level of Identification



In an effort to investigate these non-significant findings, point-biserial correlations were run to examine whether participants' political affiliation moderated the effects of the intervention. A point-biserial correlation was run on participants' political affiliation and pre-test scores on the QDI to determine if there was an initial difference in prejudiced attitudes across political affiliations. Political affiliation and prejudiced attitudes were weakly positively correlated, $r_{pb}(100) = .34, p < .001$, with more conservative participants (Republican, $M = 29.45, SD = 4.30$) exhibiting more sexist attitudes than more liberal participants (Democratic, $M = 36.78, SD = 4.26$).

Figure 3*Boxplot of QDI Pretest Scores According to Political Affiliation*

Despite this initial correlation between political affiliation and negative attitudes towards women, there was no correlation between participants' political affiliation and change scores on the QDI in the experimental condition, $r_{pb}(48) = .04, p = .79$, demonstrating that participants' political affiliation did not statistically affect the results of the intervention.

Discussion

This study did find a relationship between participants' empathy levels and character identification, showing that participants who possessed a deeper capacity for empathy exhibited stronger patterns of identification with a fictional character across conditions. Because identification was affected by an emotional, empathetic connection to a character, these results corroborate existing research on this topic (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). These findings show that

narrative interventions that promote both empathetic reactions and identification will lead to “greater enjoyment of media messages and, possibly, to greater impact” (Cohen, 2001, p. 260).

While analyses revealed that the narrative intervention was ineffective in significantly affecting prejudiced attitudes towards women in students at a Christian university, results did show that those in the experimental condition with high identification ($n = 31$) experienced the greatest change in their attitudes. In addition, participants who experienced low identification with a fictional character in the experimental condition ($n = 17$) exhibited greater attitude change than participants in the control condition. Surprisingly, those in the control condition with low identification ($n = 32$) reported more attitude change than hypothesized. This small attitude change in the control condition may have been due to participants with low identification being inattentive to the measures rather than having a clear theoretical explanation. However, as a whole, the non-significant results of the narrative intervention do have a theoretical basis.

One explanation for the lack of attitude change could lie with the narratives themselves. Both stories were relatively short, containing fewer than 540 words, and research suggests that “longer narratives may have stronger effects” (de Graaf et al., 2012, p. 818). In addition, exposing participants to a single short story intervention may not be as impactful as exposing individuals to “several stories with the same message over time” (de Graaf et al., 2012, p. 818). It is highly probable that participants’ stable, internal gender narratives were more persuasive than this short narrative intervention. There is also “ample research indicating that people focus on evidence consistent with their preexisting attitudes and ideologies and interpret evidence to be consistent with their attitudes” (Chambers et al., 2013, p. 140). It follows that the narrative intervention, rather than challenging sexist attitudes, may have been interpreted by individuals as confirming or reinforcing their personal gender narrative. It may be that the desire to “maintain

stable and predictable knowledge structures,” like individuals’ stable gender narratives, may have been more persuasive than this short narrative intervention (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 341).

Specifically for this sample of undergraduate students, it is also relevant to note that during data collection, many of the students at this Christian university were involved in social media backlash against the campus’ Black Student Association which also involved statements against women. One such statement that garnered attention on campus was an anonymous post by a YikYak user on February 23, 2022, which stated: “Hell nah I don’t wanna listen to any woman.” Although this statement is not reflective of the entire student body or even of the complex individual who originally posted the comment, the specific context surrounding this study’s data collection is worth noting so as to better elucidate its non-significant results and the potential resistance to changing prejudiced attitudes within this sample.

In this sample, more conservative participants (Republicans) initially exhibited significantly more prejudiced attitudes towards women than participants who identified as Democratic; however, this study found no relationship between political affiliation and attitude change scores which demonstrates that a narrative intervention targeting prejudice against women may be equally effective across party lines. This finding corroborates Inzlicht et al.’s (2012) research that mimicry and identification increase “implicit preference for any group that is mimicked, not just the outgroup” which explains why attitude change was relatively equal across political affiliations (p. 363). Another key aspect of this finding is a reminder of the complex narrative identities that participants bring to research. For example, conservatives’ opposition to social welfare programs or governmental programs to reduce inequality should not be taken as sufficient evidence of prejudiced attitudes (Chambers et al., 2012). There are “legitimate disagreements about whether fairness should be defined on the basis of equity,

equality, need (from each according to ability, to each according to need), or even some combination of these” (Chambers et al., 2012, p. 148). Each participant brought different definitions of fairness and equality to this study, so evaluating all of them according to a single measure of prejudice with its own specific narrative perspective would be neglecting the complexity of these participants’ personal narratives and their attitudes towards women. So, it may be that the narrative only strengthened participants’ existing attitudes towards women, or it could be that the narrative did challenge some of their attitudes but not in ways that could be empirically evaluated in this study.

As a whole, this study provided empirical support for the relationship between empathy and identification, found that students at a Christian university were susceptible to narrative persuasion regardless of their political affiliation, and established that a narrative intervention may be a potential avenue for reducing prejudice in this population. Yet, there were some relevant limitations to the current investigation that constrain the implications of its results. Although the sample size was sufficient to conduct a two-way between subjects ANOVA, the relatively small sample size within each group limits the power and effect size of the analysis, hindering the generalization of these results significantly. In addition, this study lacked political and religious ideology measures to accurately assess these key social identifications and the role they played in the maintenance of prejudiced attitudes. Finally, because this study was conducted through private, online surveys, confounding variables may have been present within different participants’ experiences of the experiment.

In light of these limitations and the need for standardization and replicability across narrative persuasion studies, future research should examine different narrative approaches and perspectives to see if there are more effective ways of reaching students whose Christianity and

political conservatism provide a foundation for their narrative identities. Future research should also analyze if a series of narrative interventions read over a specific amount of time are more effective than a single narrative intervention delivered at one time. More research is needed to fully understand how personal narratives can be challenged, reconstructed, and broadened.

Increasing empirical research and awareness of how our personal narratives affect our attitudes is essential for creating interventions to reduce prejudiced attitudes, and finding ways to increase our capacity for empathetic connection, identification, and perspective-taking is crucial for promoting relational healing in our communities.

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