Impact of Race/Ethnicity and Institutional Distrust on Psychological Outcomes of Campus Sexual Assault Victims

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Introduction

- Sexual assault (SA) is a serious issue on college campuses
  - 38% of women, 12.7% of men (Mellins et al., 2017, Brubaker et al., 2017)

- Experiencing SA → post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Lindquist et al., 2013).

- College students rely heavily on their institutions for resources
  - E.g. victims' counseling, mental health services
  - Important to understand how perceptions of institution impact victim's mental health outcomes

- Perceptions likely differ among students of color
  - Long history of prejudice and oppression within higher education (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2006)
  - How do these factors impact mental health following campus SA?

Sexual Assault and Instiutional Distrust

- Title IX: colleges required to provide all students with a safe learning environment and to enact policies that address sexual violence (Wood et al., 2016).
  - Despite this, colleges under represent the prevalence of SA at their institution (Spencer et al., 2017).

- Institutions denying or ignoring the real pervasiveness of campus SA $\longrightarrow$ false sense of security

- **Shattered Assumptions Theory** (Janoff-Bulman, 1992)

- Colleges protect the institution rather than victims (Ahrens, 2006; Martin & Powell, 1994).

- Negative responses violate expectations being supported and foster distrust among victims for their college institutions.

Sexual Assault and Instiutional Distrust (cont...)

- **Institutional betrayal**: deliberate or unintentional harm from an institution against its members (Smith & Freyd, 2014).

- Institutional betrayal ⟶ more severe PTSD symptoms (Smith & Freyd, 2013).

- 46% of female victims of campus SA report institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2013).

- Feelings of distrust likely create and/or worsen a barrier between victims, their campus institutions, and needed services following SA, exacerbating mental health consequences such as PTSD.

Institutional Distrust among Students of Color

- PWIs may not feel like safe or supportive environments
  - Problematic following sexual assault

- College environment facilitates racial/ethnic exclusion, isolation, differential treatment, and racial/ethnic microaggressions (Carson, 2009).

- Feeling distrustful of institution → survivors not receiving mental health resources → worse PTSD following SA

Current Study

The present study analyzed the mediating role of institutional distrust on campus SA victimization and PTSD severity.

Hypotheses:

1. Campus SA victimization predicts greater levels of institutional distrust and that high institutional distrust would predict greater PTSD symptoms.

2. Institutional distrust mediates the association between campus SA victimization and PTSD severity.

3. Racial/ethnic identity moderates the relationship between campus SA and higher levels of institutional distrust, such that POC experience higher levels of institutional distrust following campus SA victimization.

Methods

Participants

Data were collected as part of a larger study examining emotional well-being among college students.

- A random selection of 2,000 undergraduate students were recruited via email in September, 2019 and in September, 2020.

- 790 students agreed to participate (439 from 2019 and 351 from 2020).
  - 223 participants were excluded for answering the reliability question incorrectly and not responding past the demographics
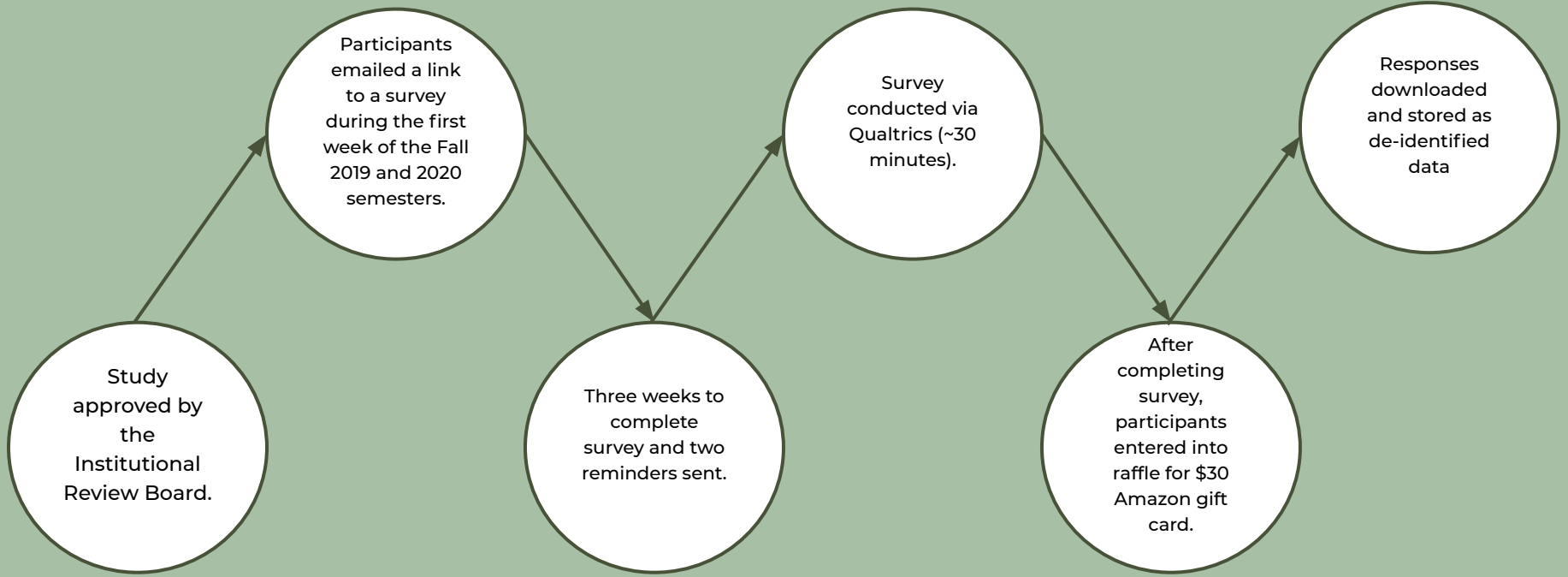 - **Final sample of *N* = 619**

Sample Demographics

Gender:
- 74.4% cisgender female
- 25.6% as cisgender male
- 1.7% as transgender or genderqueer

Race/Ethnicity:
- 73.2% White/Caucasian
- 15.6% Latinx/Hispanic
- 14.1% Asian
- 5.7% Black/African American
- 0.6% American Indian or Alaska Native
- 1.8% multi-racial/-ethnic.

Procedure

Study approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Participants emailed a link to a survey during the first week of the Fall 2019 and 2020 semesters.

Three weeks to complete survey and two reminders sent.

Survey conducted via Qualtrics (~30 minutes).

After completing survey, participants entered into raffle for $30 Amazon gift card.

Responses downloaded and stored as de-identified data

Measures

Demographics:
- Race/Ethnicity (POC v. white)
- Gender (male vs. female)

Campus Sexual Assault Victimization:
- 3-items from the 17-item Sexual Contact Scale
- "Did someone have unwanted sexual contact with you by using physical force"
- Participants indicated "yes" or "no" based on their experiences since coming to college.

Measures

Institutional Distrust:

- 7 subscale items from the 19-item scale assessing campus climate
- "[Institution Name] would…take the report seriously."
- 5-point scale: 1 indicating *strongly agree* and 5 indicating *strongly disagree*
- Averaged to create a total score for institutional distrust
  - Higher scores represent more institutional distrust.
- This subscale demonstrated excellent internal consistency (α = .95).

Measures

PTSD Symptoms:

- 20-item PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5; Weathers et al., 2013)
- "repeated, disturbing dreams of the stressful experience"
- 5-point scale: 0 indicating *not at all* and 4 indicating *extremely.*
- Items were summed to create a total score for PTSD symptoms
  - Higher scores indicate greater PTSD severity.
- This measure demonstrated excellent internal consistency (α = .94).

Data Analysis

Analyses were conducted using SPSS version 25 and Model 7 of the Process add-on for SPSS, version 3.3 (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

Proposed model
- The relationship between campus SA victimization (X) and PTSD symptoms (Y) is mediated by institutional distrust (M).

- Relationship between campus SA victimization and institutional distrust is moderated by racial/ethnic identity (W).
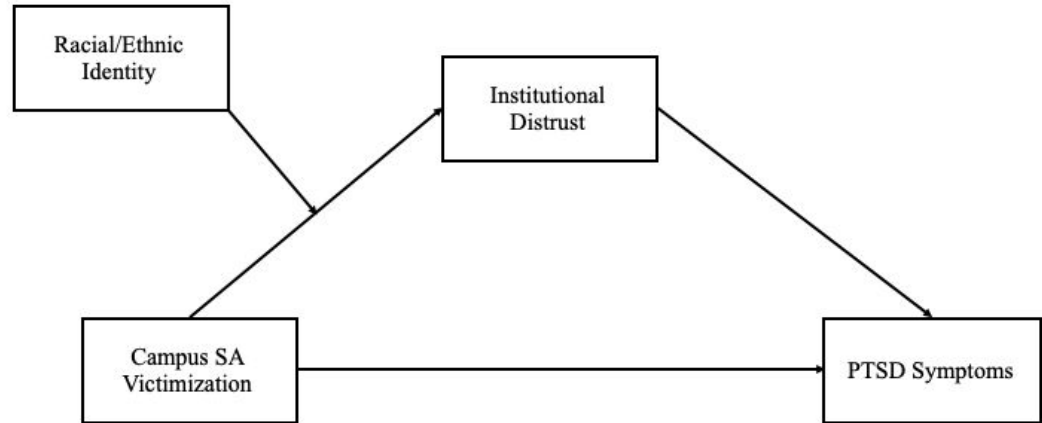
Findings
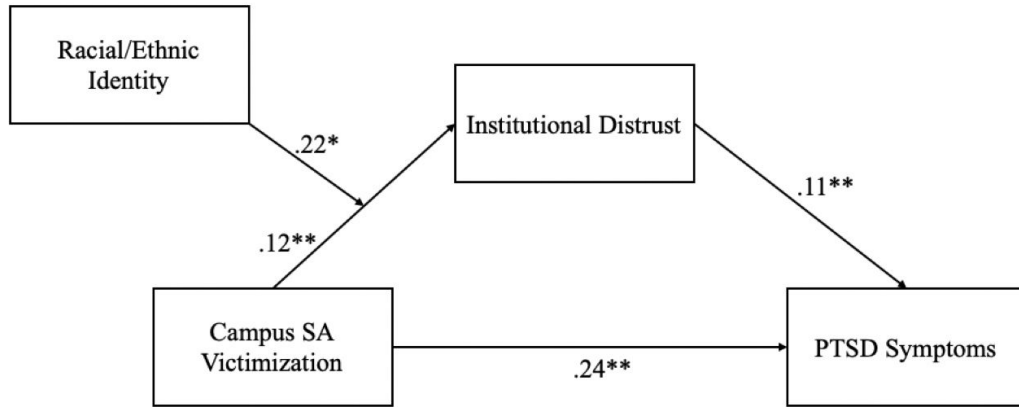
Correlations

Intercorrelations among Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	*f (%)/M(SD)*
1. Campus SA (0= no; 1 = yes)					75.8% (14.1%)
2. PTSD symptoms	.32**				3.59(1.98)
3. Institutional Distrust	.15**	.20**			2.01(.80)
4. Racial/Ethnic Identity (0= White; 1= POC)	-.05	.05	.10*		.32(.47)
5. Gender (1 = male; 2= female)	.14**	.11*	.09*	.11**	24.2% (66.7%)

Note.
*p < .05 **p < .001

- Campus SA victimization, PTSD symptoms, and institutional distrust were positively correlated.

- Positive correlation between gender and campus SA victimization and between gender and PTSD symptoms

- Institutional distrust and gender were positively correlated

- Institutional distrust and racial/ethnic identity were also positively correlated,

Moderated Mediation

Standardized regression coefficients for a moderated mediation model depicting the relationship between campus SA victimization and PTSD symptoms via institutional distrust as moderated by racial/ethnic identity.
*p < .05, **p < .001

- Participants who reported campus SA victimization had higher levels of institutional distrust (b = .41, p = .001) and more severe PTSD symptoms (b = 1.54, p < .001).

- Higher levels of institutional distrust was associated with more severe PTSD symptoms (b = .37, p = .001).

- There was no main effect of racial/ethnic identity on institutional distrust (b = .16, p = .06)

- The effect of campus SA victimization on institutional distrust was significant for students who identified as white (b = .41, 95% C.I. (.16, .64), p = .001) but not for students of color.

- The indirect effect of institutional distrust on campus SA victimization and PTSD symptoms was significant for white victims (b = .15, 95% C.I. (.03, .33)) but not victims of color (b = -.01, 95% C.I. (-.16, .13))

Interaction between Campus SA Victimization and Racial/Ethnic Identity on Institutional Distrust

Note. Mean institutional distrust scores of participants as a function of racial/ethnic identity and campus SA victimization. Error bars = ±1 S.E.
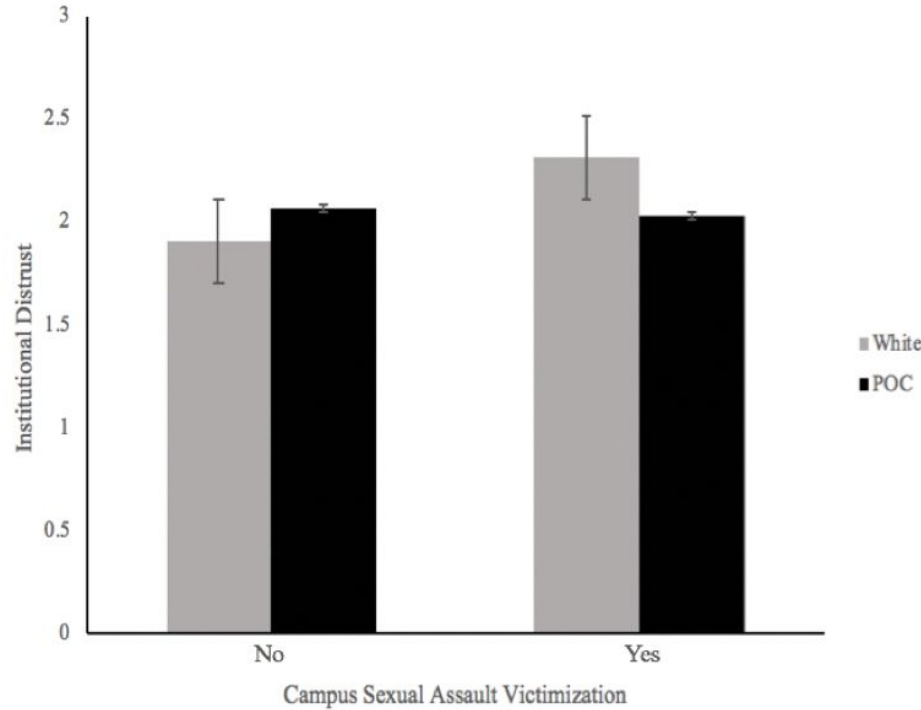
The interaction between racial/ethnic identity and campus SA victimization on institutional distrust was significant (b = -.44, 95% C.I. (-.87, -.01), $p < .05$)).

Conclusion

Hypotheses were partially supported:
- Campus SA victimization predicted higher levels institutional distrust and institutional distrust mediated the relationship between campus SA victimization and PTSD symptom severity.
  - For white victims only

- Race/ethnicity predicted worse institutional distrust following campus SA for white victims, not victims of color.

- White students have higher feelings of trust towards the college institution prior to victimization
  - Students of color hold high levels of institution distrust before SA

Findings highlight the lack of institutional support for students of color and victims of campus SA.

Limitations & Future Directions

Limitations:
- Data was collected cross-sectionally
  - Participants reported *previous* experiences of campus SA and *current* feelings of institutional distrust
  - Temporal precedence established
- Only a small sample of non-white participants endorsed campus SA victimization

Future Directions:
- Examine ways institutions can better support their students of color and students following campus SA
- Institutional reform to minimize incidences of SA and address institutional racism

Special thanks to...

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- & You! For listening to this presentation :)

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