IN SEARCH OF MEMORIES PAST:
Core Relational Themes & Affective Experiences

Jessica B. Tharaud[1], Kate Petrova[1], Robert J. Waldinger[2], & Marc S. Schulz[1]
[1]*Bryn Mawr College Department of Psychology*   [2]*Massachusetts General Hospital/Harvard Medical School*
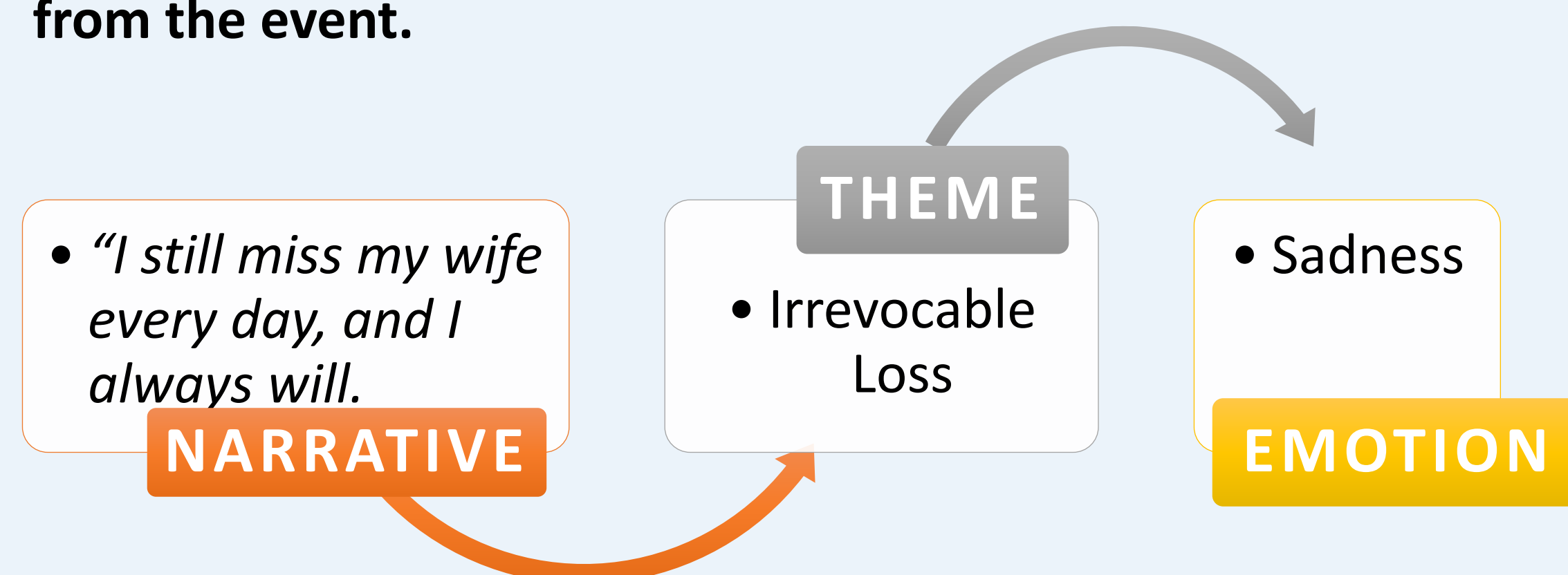
HARVARD SECOND GENERATION STUDY

Construction of Emotion

➤ Lazarus (1991) theorized tha**t emotions reflect underlying *core relational themes***, interpretations of an event's overall meaning for the individual.

➤ Previous work suggests a link between core relational themes and emotions in experimentally-manipulated written scenarios. (Smith & Lazarus, 1993).

➤ Emotion narratives may be a more ecologically valid context to examine these themes, but the theme-emotion relationship may differ by elapsed *time* & perceived *psychological distance* from the event (Lazarus 1999; Lazarus 2006).

Core Relational Theme	→	Emotion
Irrevocable Loss		Sadness
Demeaning Offense		Anger
Personal Failing		Shame

HYPOTHESIS:

1. Participants who write narratives predominantly constructed around particular relational themes will be more likely to report the emotion that corresponds with particular core relational themes.

2. The theme-emotion relationship will be stronger when (a) events are more recent and (b) participants feel less psychological distance from the event.

• *"I still miss my wife every day, and I always will.* → **NARRATIVE**

THEME • Irrevocable Loss →

• Sadness **EMOTION**

METHOD

Sample

- *N* = 305
- 2nd generation of the Harvard Study of Adult Development
- Predominantly Caucasian men (47.4%) and women (52.6%)
- Ages 40 -72 (*M* = 60; *SD* = 6)

Measures

Expressive Writing Task (adapted from McAdams, 2008)
*Please write for the next **10** minutes about the following: Thinking back over your entire life, please **identify a scene that stands out as a low point in your life story**. Even though this event is unpleasant, we would appreciate your providing as much detail as you can about it. What happened in the event, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was so bad and what the scene may say about you or your life.*

Coding System
Each narrative was coded for its predominant core relational theme by trained coders. Separately, core relational themes were rated for each narrative on a scale from 1 (not at all present) to 7 (very much present). Thirty randomly selected narratives were coded by a trained reliability coder, and kappas for predominant themes ranged from .59 to .93, *p* < .001. Interrater reliability of theme presence ranged from .63 to .96.

Emotion Triplets Self-Report (Tamir, John, Srivastava, & Gross, 2007)
*Indicate to what extent you feel this way **right now**, in this moment on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very much so).*

{ Sad, Depressed, Down }
{ Angry, Irritated Provoked }
{ Embarrassed, Humiliated, Ashamed}

Psychological Distance Questionnaire
A spontaneous self-distancing index (α = 0.64) averaged participant ratings across four items measuring psychological distance when recalling a recent event on a scale from 1 (complete self-immersion) to 7 (complete self-distance) (White, Kross, & Duckworth, 2015).
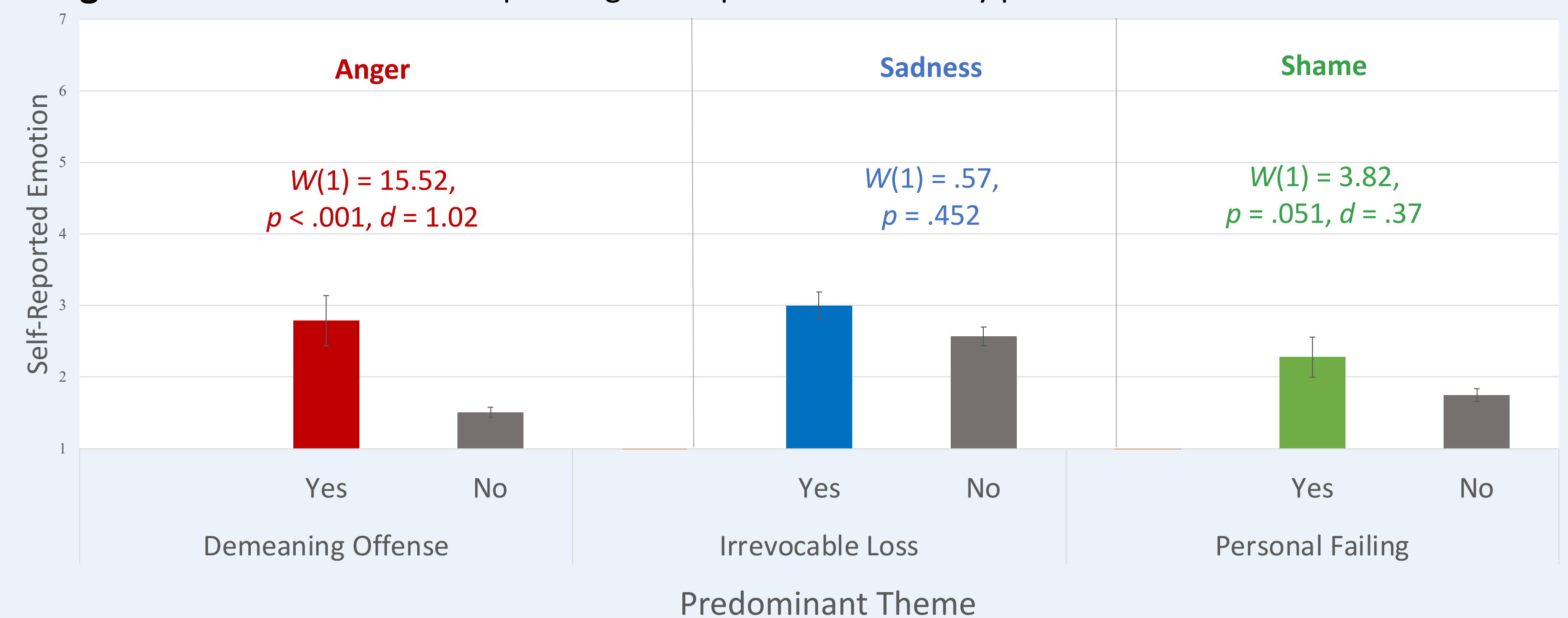
Time Since Event
How long ago did the incident you described take place?

RESULTS

HYPOTHESIS 1

Figure 1. Differences in corresponding self-reported emotion by predominant theme of narrative

As hypothesized, participants who wrote "demeaning offense" narratives reported significantly higher anger than other participants for a large effect, and participants who wrote "personal failing narratives" reported marginally higher shame than other participants. However, sadness was not significantly higher in participants with "irrevocable loss" narratives than others.

HYPOTHESIS 2A: Interaction with Psychological Distance

Figure 2. Interaction between psychological distance and presence of demeaning offense on reported anger
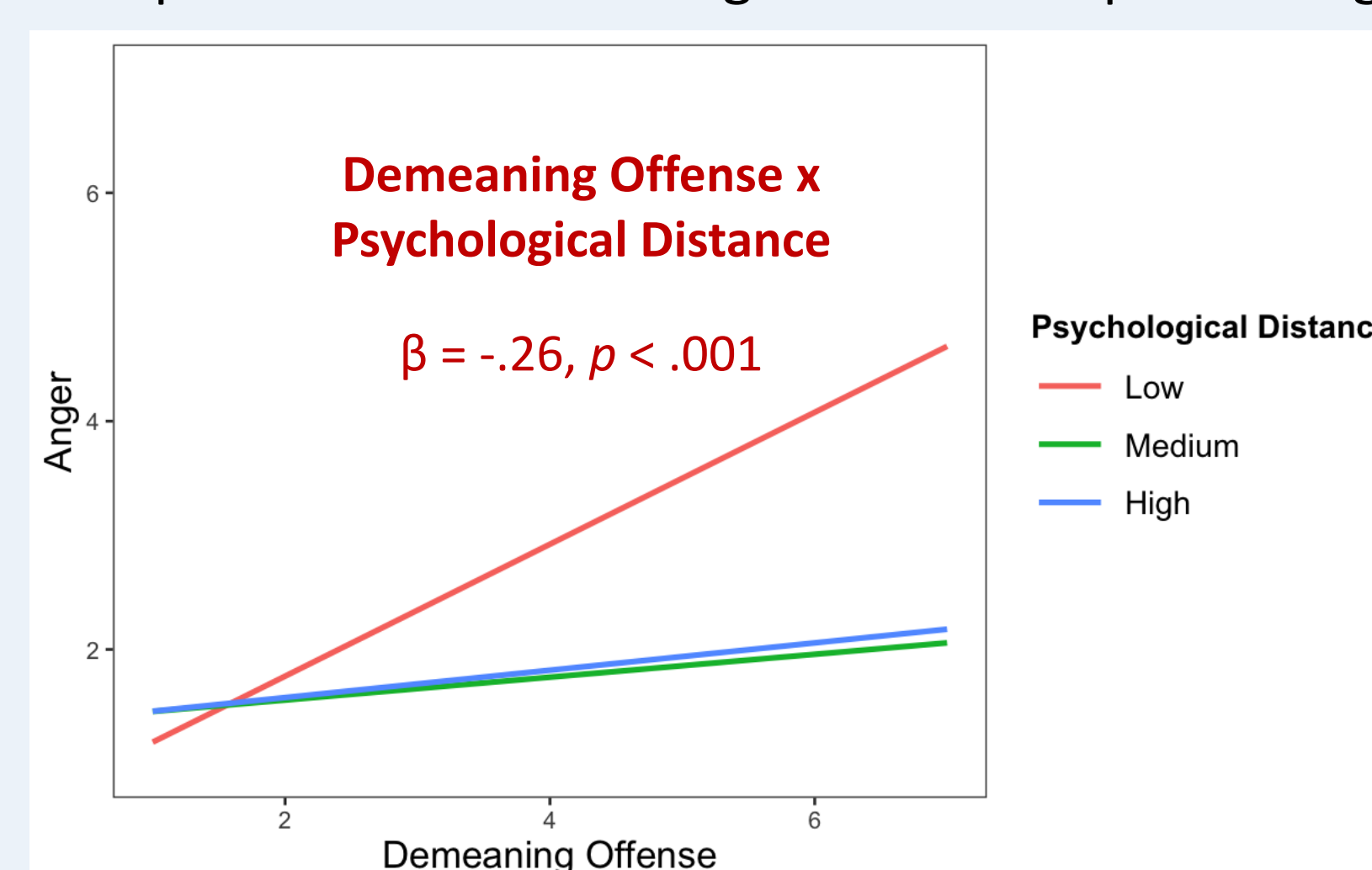

Figure 3. Interaction between psychological distance and presence of irrevocable loss on reported sadness
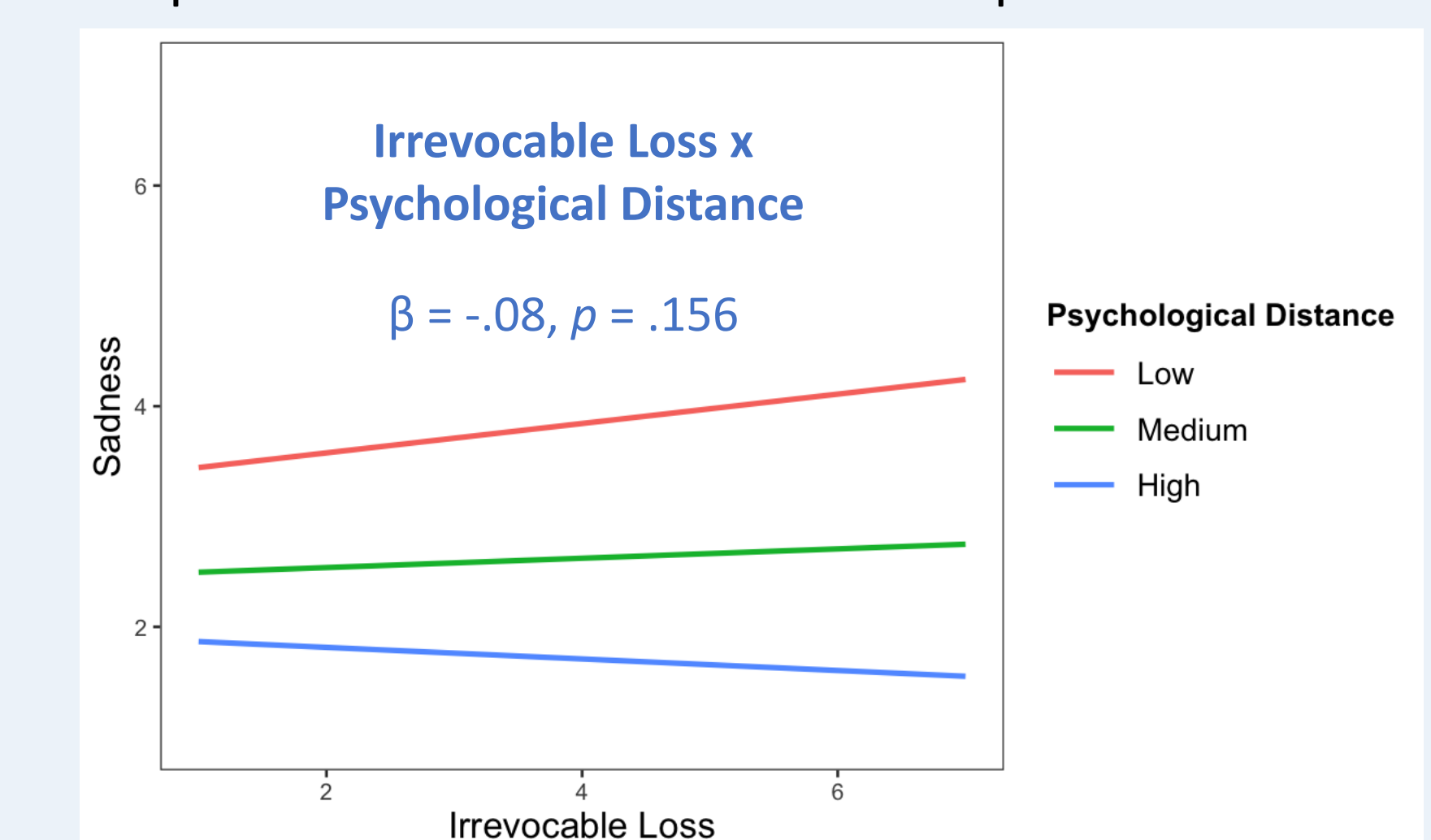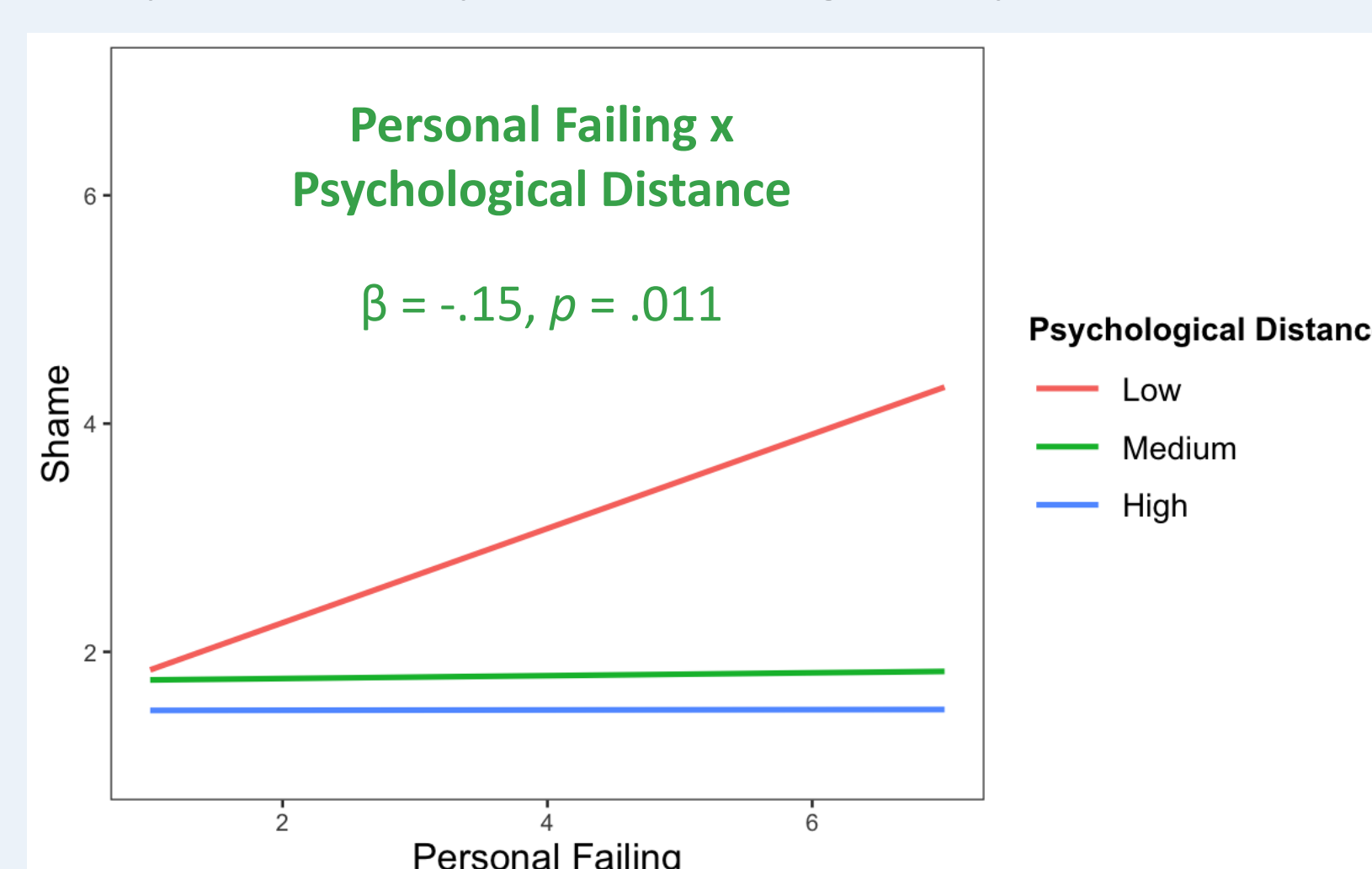

Figure 4. Interaction between psychological distance and presence of personal failing on reported shame

As hypothesized, psychological distance from the event moderates the theme-emotion association such that low distance is associated with a stronger theme-emotion link for demeaning offense/anger and personal failing/shame. The interaction between irrevocable loss and psychological distance is not significantly associated with reported sadness.

HYPOTHESIS 2B: Interaction with Time

Figure 5. Descriptive illustration of time elapsed since event
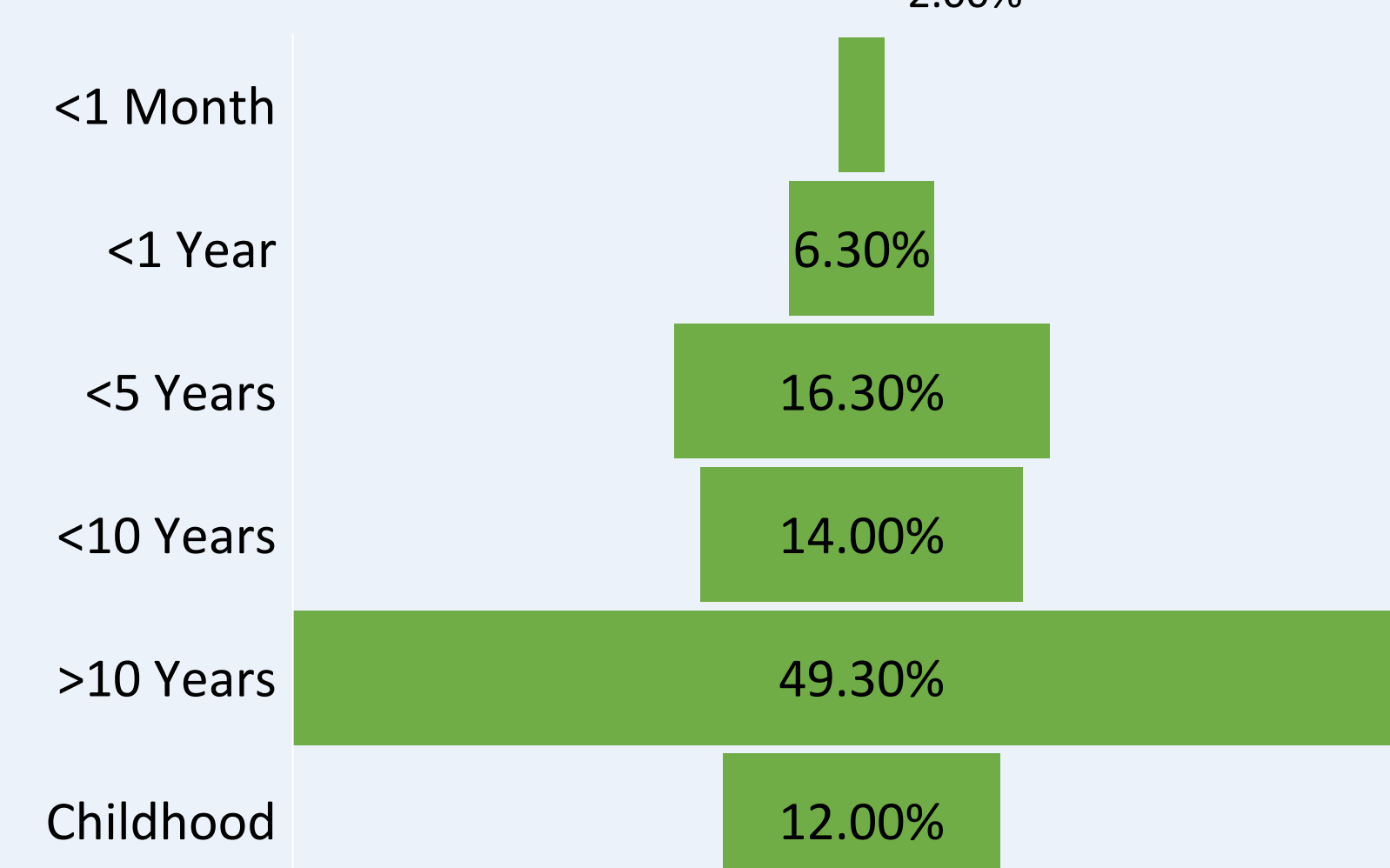
Contrary to the hypothesis, time since the event does not moderate the theme-emotion association for demeaning offense/anger (β = -.09, *p* = .151), irrevocable loss/sadness (β = -.10, *p* = .101), or personal failing/shame β = -.09, *p* = .138). When controlling for core relational themes, longer time since the event is associated with lower sadness (β = -.23, *p* < .001) and shame (β = -.15, *p* = .034) but not lower anger (β = -.10, *p* = .112).

DISCUSSION

➤ There is a link between the reconstruction of an event and the emotion that individuals feel after writing about it.
  ➤ As in previous research (Smith & Lazarus, 1993), the results do not support the link between the construction of "irrevocable loss" and sadness.
➤ The way in which individuals engage with the memory of a past event influences the strength of the relationship between the reconstruction of the event and the reported emotion.

References
Lazarus, R. S. (1991). *Emotion and adaptation.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
Lazarus, R. S. (1999). *Stress and emotion: A new synthesis.* New York: Springer.
Lazarus, R. S. (2006). Emotions and interpersonal relationships: Toward a person-centered conceptualization of emotions and coping. *Journal of Personality, 74*(1), 9–46.
McAdams, D. P. (2008). The life story interview. Retrieved from https://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/foley/instruments/interview/
Smith, C. A., & Lazarus, R. S. (1993). Appraisal components, core relational themes, and the emotions. *Cognition & Emotion, 7*(3–4), 233–269.
Tamir, M., John, O. P., Srivastava, S., & Gross, J. J. (2007). Implicit theories of emotion: Affective and social outcomes across a major life transition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92*(9), 731-744.
White, R. E., Kross, E., & Duckworth, A. L. (2015). Spontaneous self-distancing and adaptive self-reflection across adolescence. *Child Development, 86*(4), 1272–1281.