

Stigmatizing Language and Punitive Attitudes Toward Individuals with Substance Use Disorder: The Moderating Role of Personal Culpability

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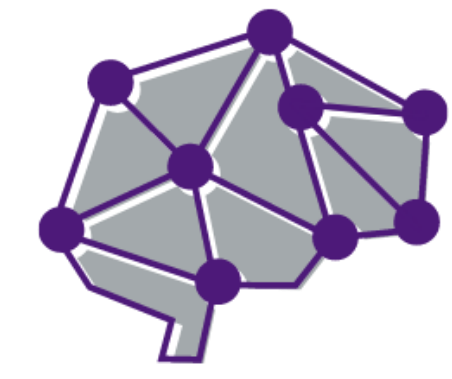
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Background

- The use of stigmatizing language has been found to impact the way those suffering with substance use disorder (SUD) are perceived by others.
- Prior research has shown that using stigmatizing language increases perceptions of personal culpability and support for punitive responses (Kelly & Westerhoff, 2010).
- Attribution theory posits that stigma results from attempts to understand behavior ranging from personal attributions (e.g., bad character) to biological (e.g., genetic). Poor character attributions are strongly associated with SUD stigma (Hamilton et al., 2023)

Aim:

- The current study examines how language influences stigma, perceived personal culpability, and punitive attitudes toward people with SUD.

Hypothesis:

- Participants viewing person-first language will report lower personal culpability and support for punishment for the character compared to participants exposed to stigmatizing language.
- The use of stigmatizing language will more strongly predict punitive attitudes among participants with higher perceived personal culpability than those with lower perceived personal culpability.

Figure 1. Personal Culpability

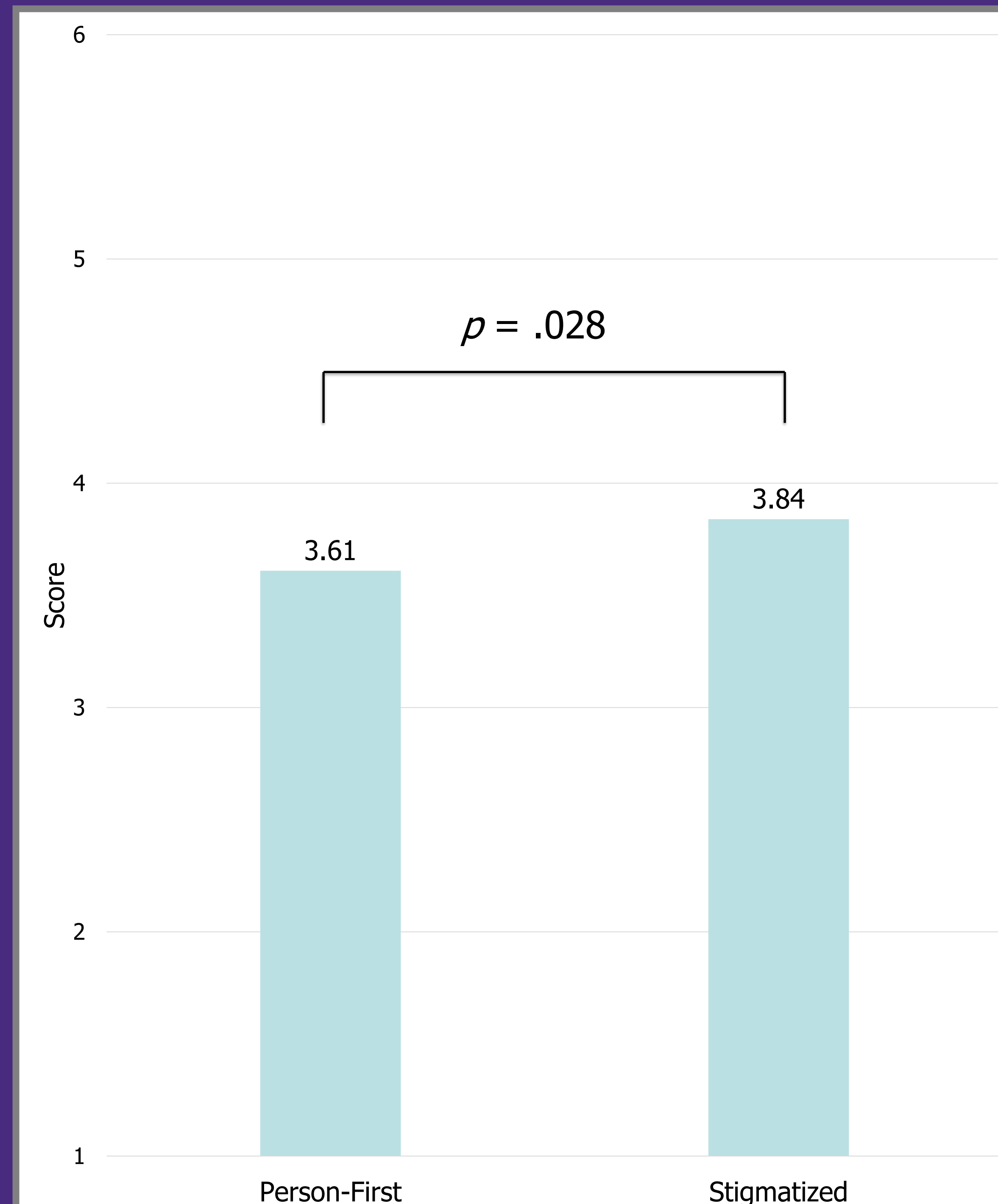
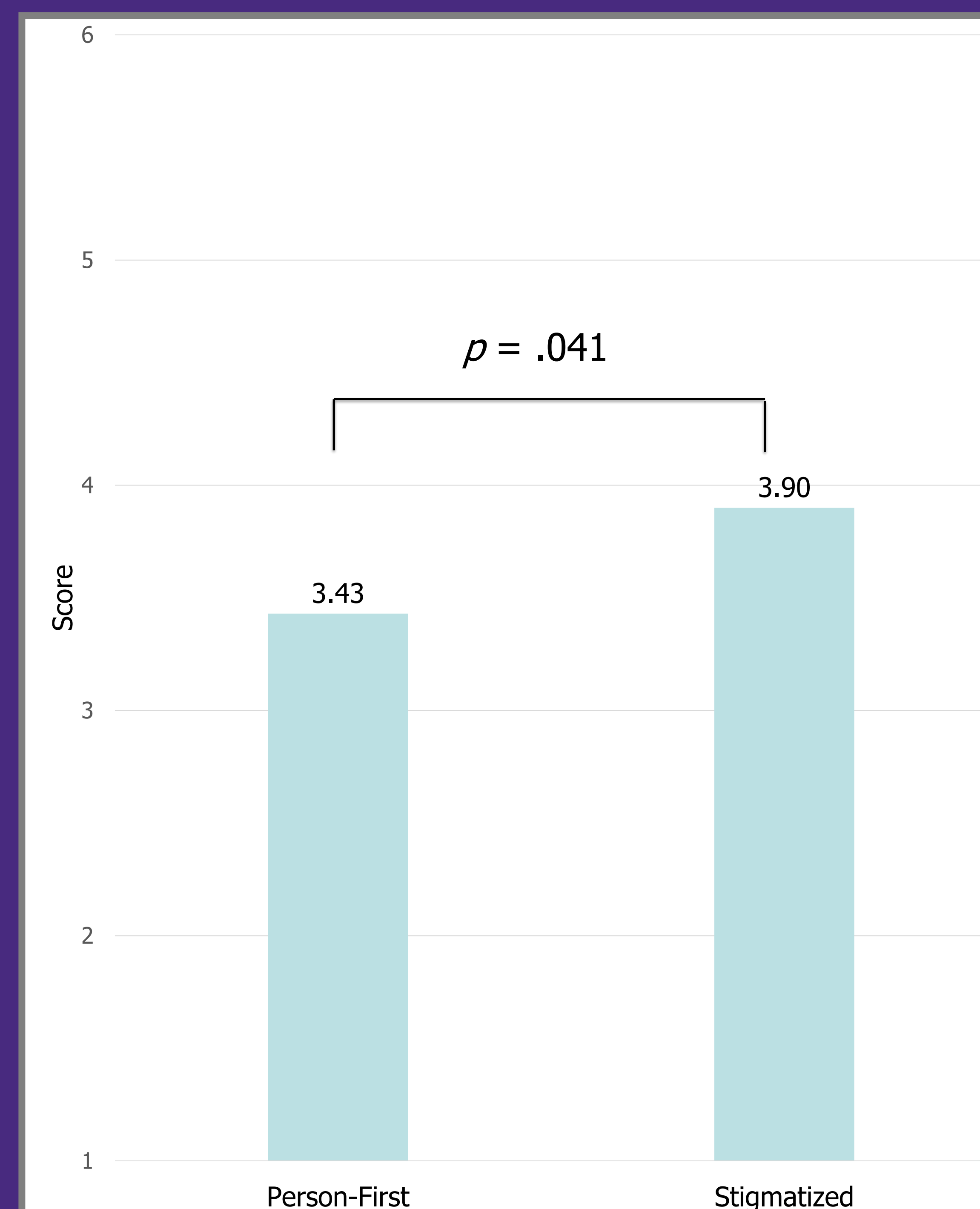


Figure 2. Support for Punishment



Results

Independent Samples *t*-Tests:

- A series of independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine whether language condition (person-first vs. stigmatized) influenced perceptions of culpability and support for punishment.

Personal Culpability:

- An independent samples *t*-test found that individuals exposed to stigmatized language ($M = 3.84, SD = 0.49$) perceived greater personal culpability than those exposed to person-first language ($M = 3.61, SD = 0.33$), $t(52) = -1.95, p = .028, d = 0.53$ (see **Figure 1**).

Support for Punishment:

- An independent samples *t*-test found that individuals exposed to stigmatized language ($M = 3.90, SD = 0.94$) perceived a greater support for punishment than those exposed to person-first language ($M = 3.43, SD = 1.00$), $t(52) = -1.78, p = .041$ (see **Figure 2**).

Moderation Analysis:

- Vignette assignment was not a significant predictor of punishment, $b = -0.13 (SE = 2.45), t = -0.05, p = .958$, and neither was personal culpability, $b = 0.84 (SE = 0.56), t = 1.48, p = .144$. Additionally, the interaction was nonsignificant, $b = 0.11 (SE = 0.66), t = 0.16, p = .872$ (see **Figure 3**).

Methods

Sample:

- Participants ($N = 56$) were recruited at public spaces in Tarrant County and asked to complete brief online survey.

Measures:

- Participants were randomly assigned to read a vignette describing an individual with substance use disorder using either person-first language ("substance use disorder") or stigmatizing language ("substance abuser")
- The Personal Culpability Scale (adapted from Kelly et al., 2010) was used to measure perceived personal responsibility for substance use.
 - The scale contains 7 items on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree), with total scores calculated by averaging responses.
- The Punishment Scale (adapted from Kelly et al., 2010) was used to measure support for punitive responses toward individuals with substance use disorder.
 - The scale contains 6 items on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree), with total scores calculated by averaging responses.

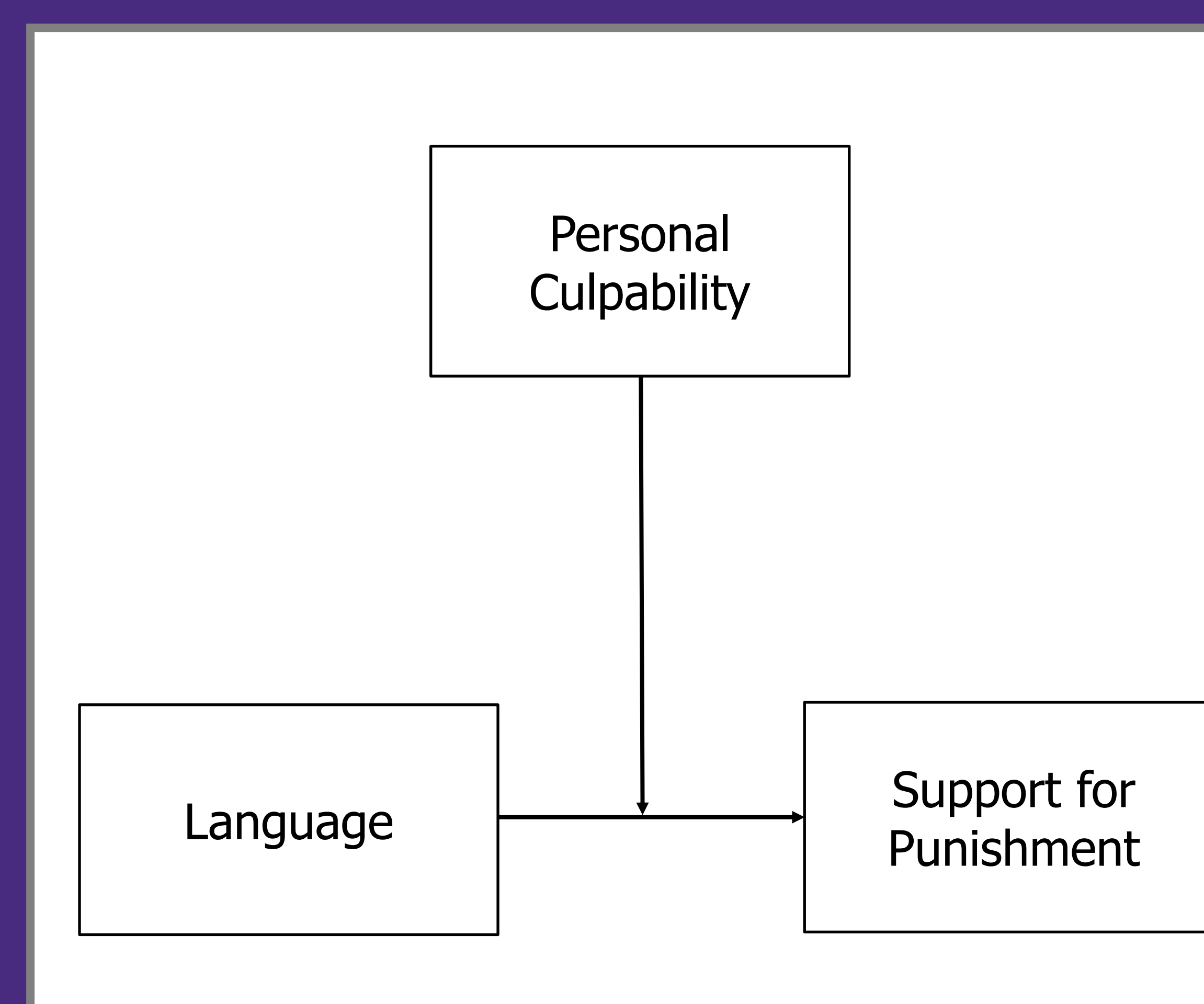
Analytic Plan:

- A series of independent samples *t*-tests and a moderation were conducted to test for differences between language conditions and for the hypothesized moderation.
- Data was screened for missing responses before analysis resulting in the exclusion of 2 participants.

Table 1. Demographics

Demographic ($N = 56$)	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	29 (51.8)
	Female	25 (44.6)
	Other	2 (3.6)
Race	Asian	5 (10.7)
	Biracial	2 (3.6)
	Black or African America	4 (7.1)
	White	37 (66.1)
	Hispanic/Latino	6 (10.7)
	Other	1 (1.8)
Age	$M(SD)$	39.4(18.1)

Figure 3. Moderation Model



References

- Kelly, J. F., & Westerhoff C. M. (2010). Does it matter how we refer to individuals with substance-related conditions? A randomized study of two commonly used terms. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 21(3), 202-207. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2009.10.010>
- Kelly, J. F., Dow, S. J., & Westerhoff, C. (2010). Does our choice of substance-related terms influence perceptions of treatment need? An empirical investigation with two commonly used terms. *Journal of Drug Issues*, 40(4), 805-818. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002204261004000403>
- Hamilton, L. J., Coleman, M. E., & Krendl, A. C. (2023). Contact reduces substance use stigma through bad character attributions, especially for U.S. health care professionals. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 37(6), 734-745. <https://doi.org/10.1037/adb0000953>

Discussion

Key Findings:

- Participants who were exposed to stigmatized language perceived greater personal culpability and support for punishment than those exposed to person-first language.
- Personal culpability did not significantly moderate the relationship between language condition and support for punishment.
- Grounded in attribution theory, the current results suggest stigmatizing language may activate poor character attributions associated with SUD, reinforcing punitive rather than rehabilitative responses.

Limitations:

- The smaller sample size limited to Tarrant County community members may have limited the ability to detect moderation effects; replication is needed with larger, more diverse samples.
- The study relied on vignette-based scenarios, which may not fully reflect real-world judgments about SUD.

Future Directions:

- Future studies should explore interventions aimed at reducing stigma and lowering perceived personal culpability for individuals with SUD.
- Examining other variables such as exposure to SUD, treatment support, or policy preferences could broaden understanding of how language shapes SUD stigma and attitudes.