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Fan Attachments: The Pedagogy of Student Affairs Practitioners' Parasocial Relationships  
During the Great Distress Period

By

ALFRED E. DAY III  
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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in the

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## **Abstract**

Parasocial Relationships can mirror social relationships, particularly to individuals in isolation. Student Affairs practitioners were enormously impacted by the conditions of the Great Distress Era (the period that included the COVID-19 restrictions, racial violence and protests in response, political unrest). Many engaged in parasocial relationships as a means of escape and connection during this time. Qualitative research interviews with student affairs professionals who worked supporting students during the period were conducted to examine the impact parasocial relationship had on their life and profession. Participants were found to have made meaning of these relationships through their use as coping mechanisms and connection points with others. These relationships also impacted their professional practice. This provides an opportunity for institutions to create priorities and support mechanisms for professionals in positions that can be expected to manage distress and experience that distress vicariously.

## Acknowledgements

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

In the United States, the period of time starting in March 2020 and persisting through the August 2021 was one of great distress. This “Great Distress” period was the result of several converging factors. First, the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide quarantine restrictions placed on the populace to control the spread of the virus created an external social isolation far different than the isolation that often comes with introversion or a personal choice to temporarily restrict social contacts. “Jeffers (2022) found that pandemic related stressors could have a long-lasting effect on well-being. Additionally, this period included a large number of national protests in response to the unjust killing of Black people by police officers and a national conversation on the systemic racism, personal racism, and anti-Blackness seen specifically in the United States. This period also included a wave of violence directed against people of Asian descent that many believe was a direct result of then-President of the United States Donald Trump laying blame for the virus on the People’s Republic of China (Benjamin, 2021). These factors cumulated in a historically contentious presidential election that was not finalized on election day, and ultimately resulted in an attempted insurrection at the United States Capitol as the results were tabulated and the winner officially named. As such, this period was fraught with many stressors impacting individuals, both directly and indirectly. I use the phrase “Great Distress” specifically to denote the multiple factors at play during the research period in addition to restrictions due to Covid-19 quarantine requirements. While the phrase “dual pandemic” came into use to describe the twin concerns of Covid-19 and systemic racism (Newman et al., 2023), I use the phrase “Great Distress” to further denote the period to account

for the additional stressors of the contentious election and challenges to the peaceful transfer of power in the United States.

During this time, colleges and universities had to respond to these ever-changing conditions and simultaneously continue to provide education and services to students. Due to quarantine restrictions, face-to-face learning quickly moved to remote delivery, in many cases including classes that previously required hands-on learning and direct individual oversight.

Outside of the classroom, student support services, largely delivered by student affairs professionals, had to find ways to continue working with students remotely as well as deliver some services directly to students in-person, risking exposure to the COVID-19 virus. For example, many students moved out of their university-owned housing for the duration of the crisis while others stayed in residence halls and had to align with quarantine restrictions, ironically in an environment designed around community living and connections. Live-in residence life professionals have lodging that is set within student residential communities in order to create community and oversee behavioral concerns. This meant that they had to not only quarantine within the same communities, but were responsible for enforcing the quarantine guidelines, sometimes putting themselves at risk of exposure to the virus. Quickly, residence life professionals found themselves deemed as “essential workers,” which meant that they could not exempt themselves from face-to-face contact with their clients (Nyunt, 2021). Similarly, student affairs professionals such as counselors, therapists, and other student-facing positions had to manage an overwhelming number of students who found themselves in distress in new and unforeseen ways that were beyond the typical student distress experienced under “normal” conditions. This all was taken on of course without research or developed resources for best



practices in a global pandemic. These factors, amongst others, compounded responsibilities and exacerbated job stressors that were already becoming increasingly difficult to manage due to the mental health crisis in higher education, thus creating an environment rife with overwhelming distress amongst student affairs practitioners (Nyunt, 2021).

The changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic brought stressors beyond many students' ability to cope (Cordaro, 2020). Anxiety, fear, shame, and helplessness are just some of the psychological impacts of loneliness during COVID-19 isolation (Breslin, 2021). Researchers have also noted that a sense of loneliness and social isolation made it difficult for students to remain engaged (Adjei et al., 2021).

If these factors have been serious concerns for students, the same can be true for practitioners who work with those students. For many student affairs professionals, the isolation required to comply with quarantine restrictions cut them off from engaging in relationships and community previously used as coping mechanisms to manage their stress. For those in live-in positions, the requirement to maintain residence in a shared community in order to provide services and maintain employment meant that these workers could not spend time with family or friends for fear of transmitting the disease outside of their own households. Even for those whose role did not require them to interact with students physically, the requirement to support and address distress amongst students surely added to the distress they experienced themselves by simply being a person living in this period. How did these practitioners manage their distress in these extraordinary circumstances? This question is especially important to consider given a growing concern over the attrition of practitioners in student affairs. Marshall et al. (2016) found that a majority of the participants of their study only spent 1-5 years in the field before leaving.

With an already elevated level of concern for persistence in the field, the Great Distress period may have created a “perfect storm” of difficult circumstances.

Many individuals in isolation chose to increase their engagement with media during this period. A research report commissioned by Fandom.com, an entertainment and marketing website, found that there was a year-to-year increase of 54% of self-identified fans who used entertainment to cope with stress of social isolation or mentally relax (Paul, 2020). This significant increase in individuals coping with stress specifically through the seeking out of entertainment is quite telling and can possibly inform further academic research.

Aleksieva (2012) purports that the media have taken on the role of third parent and are replacing religion in our modern society as entertainment. Specifically, fictional media are used commonly as a coping mechanism. McNee (2002) also notes that individuals meet social needs in times of social instability through interpretive schemata to provide a framework for acting, challenging, or escaping established institutions and beliefs. However, this big jump in using entertainment as a coping mechanism indicates that the externally- posed isolation caused by the pandemic-related quarantine could possibly have played a substantial role in the increased use of these strategies during the “Great Distress” period. The larger engagement with media while in isolation likely increased people’s engagement in parasocial relationships, which are defined as social relationships people engage in with characters only known from media (Hartmann, 2016). This in turn would play into creating an illusion of the emotional engagement found in real world relationships (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Parasocial relationships can result in both positive and negative outcomes for individuals (Jarzyna, 2020).

Given the levels of social isolation and distress of the “Great Distress” period, parasocial relationships provide a promising area of inquiry into understanding practitioners’ response to distress and persistence in the field. This historic moment had a great effect on the mental well-being of practitioners (Hermanson, 2021). One survey found that 80% of respondents who worked in student affairs believed that COVID-19 had negatively impacted their mental health (DeGuzman et al., 2021). Those who played student-facing roles had unique responsibilities that had a significant impact on practitioner resiliency. Hartmann (2016) notes that parasocial relationships play a significant role as a coping mechanism for people who suffer from loneliness, but the externally imposed social isolation required in this unique timeframe may have raised this method to a prominence that was likely more significant than in the past. In isolating this coping mechanism to prominence, a unique opportunity to study its impact on practitioners presents itself.

While there is research that explores the potential influence of film on understandings of teaching, learning, and the university (Johnstone et al., 2018), Giroux (2004) also proposes that films exist as pedagogy, teaching those who view them about the world, and filmmakers have an ethical responsibility to understand their impact on the world at large. Giroux (2008) later adds that electronically driven and internet-based media are major sites of education that exist outside of the formal schools. While film is only one media in which individuals engage with parasocial relationships, there are many more that may apply, particularly in the age of social media. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic provided a ripe moment to explore how media engagement may have helped individuals manage stress during the global pandemic, especially among professionals in particularly isolating and stressful working environments. As such, this study aims to explore the

impact of media engagement as represented by the emotional intensity of parasocial relationships on practitioners of student affairs during the “Great Distress” period.

### **Research Questions**

While there have been ample studies of how parasocial relationships impact the population in general, and even college students specifically, I could not locate any studies examining the parasocial relationships of student affairs practitioners. This qualitative study was therefore guided by the following research questions:

How did student affairs professionals who engaged in parasocial relationships think about and make meaning of those engagements? How did those engagements affect professional practice and their coping with distress during the Great Distress period?

## Chapter 2

### Theoretical Framework and Methodology

#### Theoretical Framework

The concept of parasocial relationships guided this study. The first identification and proposition of parasocial interactions and relationships was done by Horton and Wohl (1956) through the lens of Communication and Media Studies. Horton and Wohl's (1956) foundational research was done in the earliest days of television. Specifically, their research centered on examining how individuals felt strong connections and built emotional bonds with mediated characters. They noted that the mediated characters sought to create the "illusion of intimacy" with the audience and that the devotee came to believe they knew the character more profoundly than others did.

Horton and Wohl (1956) also noted the unidirectional nature of these interactions, paying special attention to the lack of opportunity for the spectator to respond to the media character at the moment the interaction occurs. In essence, these relationships were decidedly one-sided on the part of the consumer without reciprocation by the media figure, which made this relationship markedly distinct from real world face-to-face relationships.

Horton and Wohl (1956) were a bit ambiguous about the phrasing of "parasocial relationship" as opposed to "parasocial interaction". Nonetheless, it is important to clarify the distinction between these two concepts. A parasocial interaction occurs during the engagement with a media character but ends when the program ends, whereas a parasocial relationship endures over time (Dibble et al., 2016). Thus, parasocial interactions are components of parasocial relationships, but the terms are distinct and need to be clarified as such.

Furthermore, parasocial relationships are by nature comprised of illusory activities due to the necessary condition that an individual engages in the relationship despite knowing consciously that they do not have a relationship with these individual and/or characters in the real world (Hartmann, 2016). For the purposes of this research, parasocial relationships will be defined as a relationship an individual engages in with a character or individual through media that is primarily but not exclusively one-sided in nature, which mirrors a real-world relationship in emotion and sense of connectedness.

Parasocial relationships have also been theorized through other disciplines, such as developmental psychology. Stever (2011) examined parasocial relationships and asserted that, particularly for those in isolation, parasocial relationships can emulate real world relationships and are often sought during critical life transitions. He provides the example of a survivor of sexual assault preferring the safety of a distant parasocial relationship rather than interacting with individuals in the real world. In another example, middle-aged fans of singer Josh Groban noted that engaging in schoolgirl-like romantic feelings for a celebrity made them feel young again (Stever, 2011).

In examining parasocial relationship's relation to well-being, Hartmann (2016) challenged what he termed the Compensation Hypothesis made by Horton and Wohl (1956). Horton and Wohl (1956) claimed that the parasocial relationship "can properly be called compensatory, inasmuch as it provides the socially and psychologically isolated with a chance to enjoy the elixir of sociability" (p. 222). Hartmann (2016) asserted that parasocial relationships can satisfy a need for belonging, and in contrast to Horton and Wohl's (1956) assertion, do not necessarily serve to compensate for social deficits. In fact, the intensity of parasocial relationships is strongest in people with strong interpersonal skills (Hartmann, 2016). Hartmann

(2016) further noted that new interactive technologies may intensify relationship formation and parasocial encounters to an extent that new descriptive terminology may be needed.

The advent of social media has changed the nature of parasocial relationships immensely, particularly in relation to real or perceived reciprocity of relationships with media personalities and the ambiguous line between fiction and reality of social media figures. Bond (2016) notes that through a like, retweet, or quote of an individual through social media, a celebrity can briefly transform a parasocial relationship into a social relationship, increasing its strength. Bond (2016) also noted that the strength of teenagers' relationships with social media figures increased in proportion to the perception of realism; in this case, the user's perception that the communication had a level of authenticity which enhanced the intensity of the relationship.

In effect, the more the character/individual aligned with the respondent's perception of reality, the stronger the parasocial relationship was likely to be. This phenomenon pointed to the strength of parasocial relationships with non-fictional celebrities engaging in social media (Tanupabrungsun & Hemsley, 2018). Non-fictional celebrities now engage in social media in different and more complex ways in order to draw increased attention, often during a time in which the more traditional media channel is presenting them in a fictional context (Tanupabrungsun & Hemsley, 2018).

As Hartmann (2016) notes, the interactive nature of what has become to be known as social media has increased the complexity of parasocial relationships due to the possibility of actual interaction with the mediated individual. In a modern context, however, these relationships exist alongside more traditional and unidirectional media channels and often intersect with these media through actors and creators engaging in the more interactive media at the same time as the traditional media, for example, by engaging with fans via Twitter during the

broadcast of a television show. The research conducted in this work was qualitative in nature as the phenomenon examined--that of individuals parasocial relationships during the Great Distress era and its impact on their behavior--is complex in nature. Qualitative research allows for the examination of complex questions considering the multiple realities experienced by the individual study participants (Suter, 2014). The impact of parasocial relationships on individuals in general, and student affairs practitioners specifically is difficult to examine fully. A research method that can account for the complexities in human nature is appropriate to this endeavor. The Great Distress period impacted all areas of life for those who endured it, personal and professional, and thus must consider the multiple and conflicting realities of those who experienced the period. The research question of “how did student affairs professionals who engaged in parasocial relationships think about and make meaning of those engagements and how did those engagements affect professional practice and their coping with distress during the Great Distress period?” takes a careful and considered approach to answer.



## Chapter 3

### Literature Review

In seeking to answer the research questions proposed, I will review parasocial relationships, their relation to human behavior, and how they might influence the underlying pedagogical message of media content. I will also examine literature that explores how individuals respond to explicit or implicit pedagogy in media as these can further inform how the parasocial relationships student affairs practitioners engaged with involving current and modern media figures and characters, during the research period influenced their own work and persistence in the pandemic.

In examining parasocial relationships, one must first reckon with the impact of media consumption on human perceptions and behavior. Media are intertwined with education in their ability to build and expand knowledge and transmit cultural values (Aleksieva, 2012). Of course, particularly with commercially produced media, the goal of commercial media is to create entertainment that attracts viewers to whom products can be sold (Wright et al., 2017). Any transmission of cultural or moral values is secondary at best and often unintentional.

From a cultural evolution lens, social learning provides a shortcut to learning through individual experience but is not inherently selective in its value transmission. The transmission of learning and values is rarely the main priority of commercially produced media; however, it can be a secondary or tertiary result of the narrative. Much research on entertainment's impact on moral development assumes that media content can shift moral values over time (Eden et al., 2014; Globokar, 2018; Mensah & Kyei, 2019) In relation to social media, a recent quantitative research study found a positive impact in the use of social media amongst adolescents in the areas of intimacy, individuality, sociality, decency, and diversity (Kusumajati et al., 2020). Specifically, during the "Great Distress" era, parasocial interactions served as functional

alternatives to face-to-face interactions. Another study noted the potential negative impacts of social media use such as the potentially addictive nature attached to its use, its potential to make users vulnerable to frauds and scams, and the potential reputational impact associated with the spreading of falsehood about an individual (Akram & Kumar, 2017).

For many marginalized groups, representation of their experience within the context of mainstream entertainment is seen as a critical step in their acceptance in the wider culture. People in the LGBTQ (lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer) communities, which have been historically marginalized, have experienced positive advancement in the scripting of LGBTQ characters and the casting of actors who identified as members of their community in recent years as the political and social landscape has changed significantly, allowing their voices to be heard (Edwards, 2020). Edwards' (2020) study examined, via textual analysis, the growth and development of scripted content for LGBTQ characters in television comedies. It specifically noted that role representation and visibility have played historically in the political goals and activism in support of this community.

Others note the potential harm that can be done through the lack of intent towards positive value transmission. A report found that through misrepresentations of the justice system, the scripted crime genre of television had a likely unintended impact on the perceptions of the public towards law enforcement (USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, 2020). The impact on those consuming this media genre was subject to misrepresentation of the workings of the criminal justice system, racism in policing and prosecution of crimes being made invisible, and the normalization of the idea that officers needed to "break the rules" to see justice done. This type of influence taken without a critical lens, can perpetuate stereotypes and cause real world harm outside the entertainment's intent.

People with disabilities (PWD) experience a complex set of circumstances around media representation, particularly in relation to participation in athletic endeavors such as the Paralympics. This representation can mask the real-world struggles of everyday PWD in accomplishing mundane tasks and shift the focus from systemic societal issues to the focus on individual exceptionalism (Kearney et al., 2019). In this study, the analysis of advertisements for the 2016 Paralympic Games was found to reinforce ideas that physical disabilities were a barrier to be overcome by grit and determination, rather than normalize experiences of people with disabilities and reinforce existing sociocultural barriers challenging this population. This type of representation served as “inspiration porn” (Kearney et al., 2019 p. 17) for those who watched it but did not share the identity of those who experience physical disabilities.

### **Media as Pedagogy**

As we look at the potential impact of the media on how we perceive each other and the world we live in, we must also consider what these perceptions teach us both consciously, and--through the lens of parasocial relationships—subconsciously. Humans experience media in several ways. Giroux (2004) asserts that media, specifically film, can and should be used as a pedagogical vehicle in the construction of public memory and national identity. A few years later, the assertion would be made that screen culture and new electronically driven media, including the internet, are the major sites of education for the public (Giroux, 2008). In looking specifically at the pedagogy of film as it relates to representations of higher education, researchers note that popular culture, through the medium of film, has the potential to inform approaches to teaching and learning and the expectations thereof (Johnstone et al., 2018).

In speaking to the experience of educators, there is vast complexity in the lessons that media teach about the practice of education, both to the public in general and to students and

educators specifically. Media provides often stereotypical views of educators in ways that inform the culture at large in potentially negative ways, such as the image of the lascivious English professor or the socially awkward genius (Marquis et al., 2020). They also promote images of the university or college as a place of hyper-intelligence and hard work where only the truly gifted individual can find success (Marquis et al., 2020). The impact on the practitioner working in these spaces of those types of stereotypes is of great interest, particularly considering their place and sense of belonging within the larger culture.

Any discourse of media in the modern age must consider the use of social media amongst students and practitioners. The use of social media by practitioners is most relevant to this topic. The two largest professional organizations in the field of student affairs collaborated on professional competencies, and added a technology competency to demonstrate how critical this area is for the current practitioner (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). On the use of social media, researchers stressed the need for practitioners to be thoughtful and deliberate about their digital identity as professionals, crafting one that supported their professional identity and work with students (Ahlquist, 2016; Cabellon & Payne-Kirchmeier, 2016). In looking specifically at how practitioners used Facebook, common popular topics were seeking professional advice, connecting with others in the professional community, benchmarking professional expectations between institutions, and sharing resources (Eaton et al., 2021). This has not been examined fully during the “Great Distress” period as yet.

This use of social media to connect can be seen as analogous to the creation of professional counter-spaces which have been found to have an advantageous impact on marginalized groups in higher education (West & Smith, 2021). This study examined how African American women in Higher Education used professional counter-spaces to come into

community with each other to combat marginalization, isolation, and other challenges they experienced in the field. This saw many benefits including sharing collective wisdom, providing opportunities for leadership, and enhancement of their success. In examining how practitioners use not only social media, but other media new insight might be gleaned about how practitioners share digital space, find common culture with students, and connect with each other for mutual benefit.

While engaging with media in all its forms was often conducted out of necessity during the “Great Distress” period, the modern era likely will continue to be impacted by how much of our modern connection with each other is through much of this common media experience.

While there has been some professional direction and examination of how social media is used by practitioners, the impact of this use on the individual has yet to be examined as thoroughly as it could be. Eaton (2021) notes that future research should examine how social media algorithms have great influence on individuals and that many experience digital space as disruptive to their work and identity.

It isn’t enough to call upon practitioners to be familiar with how the technology works; to wrestle with their own use of it and connection to it, particularly by examining the parasocial relationships they enjoy as individuals and professionals is also essential. Without placing the work of educators in general and student affairs practitioners specifically within the context of the culture within which they practice, we risk becoming detached from the world in which we live alongside students and their families.

Student affairs practitioners may often face high levels of stress in their work. How technology may play a role in supporting their success and persistence is important to consider. Student affairs practitioners have of course found ways to manage stress outside of the “Great

Distress” period. One study found practitioners engaged in potentially negative coping behaviors such as alcohol and substance dependence, unhealthy eating habits, and experiencing significant changes in an emotional state, like experiencing depression or feelings of guilt Lynch & Glass, 2020).

Others engaged in more positive coping strategies. Another study focusing specifically on women in higher education showed that they utilized active coping strategies, making a conscious choice to reduce the burden of stress as it happens, as well as social support, sharing the burden and impact of stress with others in the workplace to cope with stressors (Kersh, 2018). Yet another encouraged the use of practicing mindfulness as a means of coping with distress in Student Affairs Practice (Burke et al., 2016).

Many of the normal strategies for coping with this distress were circumscribed from use during the “Great Distress” period as social contact was limited outside of one’s own household. For example, seeking social support, an often-informal process, would require a more formalized approach when working remotely or in geographic isolation. One of the few coping strategies for distress available in these restricted circumstances is engagement in parasocial relationships with mediated characters. These relationships present an avenue for relieving distress and for continued social interaction with those outside of the household, albeit remotely.

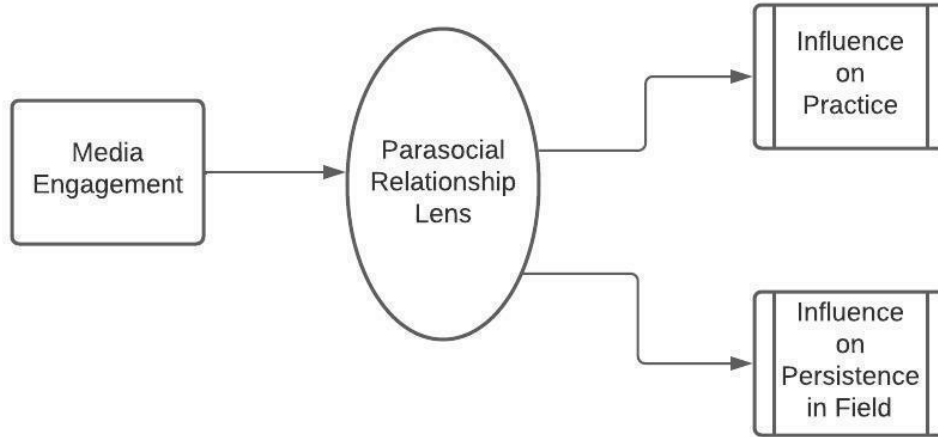
This depth and intensity of engagement with parasocial relationships has the potential to support psychological and social needs and generate socio-cultural learning beyond the insular educational learning in physical context that educators generally experience. If Giroux (2004) is correct that these components of media culture constitute a pedagogy, what then is this pedagogy teaching practitioners? This pedagogy could potentially create negative associations and expectations of work within higher education, such as viewing university administrators as solely

concerned with policing student misbehavior. In essence, the only message about their roles is the worn trope of the stern university administrator who doesn't want their students to have fun as demonstrated in numerous college films. By identifying those parasocial relationships with positive associations, a form of support and succor can be drawn from the pedagogy laid out through these unique connections. It could also generate new approaches and strategies that can be applied to working with students in distress. While the "Great Distress" period is unique and unlikely to be replicated at this scale in the near future, it allows us an opportunity to focus on this potential pedagogy as it relates to practitioners and explore whether the teachings are aligned with the professional values within student affairs.

During the "Great Distress" period, the intense parasocial engagement of student affairs professionals may have had an unforeseen and outsized impact on their student affairs practice, creating a media-informed pedagogy of practice external to and distinct from the formalized systems of training and education for student affairs. This influence, if in existence, may have related to the representation and identification with characters that individuals formed parasocial relationships with during this period. These parasocial relationships could have had a similar impact as "real world" relationships on employee persistence. Finally, these relationships, in their relation to real-world friendships, might have had an impact on persistence in the field. The following illustration outlines this potential process.

**Figure 1**

*Parasocial Relationship Influence Process*



There are myriad factors that influence individual practice. Most studies will focus on one aspect of influence from the point of view of the researchers. Student affairs practitioners are expected to maintain competencies in a variety of areas as outlined in the Professional Competencies document produced by the two largest professional organizations within the field (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). This document covers aspects of education and training for entry level practitioners as well as expectations of competency of policy both nationally and at the institution site. The impact of parasocial relationships in the workplace-- specifically amongst student affairs practitioners--is an area that is rich for further examination.

The “Great Distress” period disrupted many of the typical practices used in shaping one’s student affairs practice. Due to remote working and isolation, much of site-based policy and practice was not applicable. The unique nature of the pandemic meant there was nothing covering current circumstances within their education or in the training after securing positions. The Obama administration did create a plan for responding to a pandemic (The Obama



Administration, 2016), but the then current administration did not utilize this resource in the initial stages of the crisis (Knight, 2020). This left no roadmap that prepared practitioners to deal with a pandemic, particularly one that coincided with global unrest. The unique circumstances of the period meant that no one who experienced the nearest analogue, the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918, was still alive to advise. As a result of typical practice being impacted by the global context, cultural influences may have assumed a more significant role.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Research**

#### **Recruitment and Data Collection**

The participants for this study were recruited using both personal contacts the researcher has developed in the field and through connections made through affiliation with Comic-Con International, as well as utilizing social media and asking for participants via professional Facebook groups such as SAComics, Student Affairs Professionals, and ExPats of Student Affairs. The population from Comic-Con International and the SAComics Facebook group, having by the nature of their organization a previously demonstrated connection to popular culture, had a high likelihood of having a pre-established value around parasocial relationships and were likelier to engage in them. Similarly, the Student Affairs Professionals group contained a high population of student affairs professionals, and the ExPats of Student Affairs group was likely to contain individuals who are considering or have left the field of student affairs. By targeting these groups composed of individuals with pre-existing connections to popular culture and the field of student affairs, I hoped to recruit participants who had a higher likelihood of generating rich data for the study. Prospective participants were contacted via email, posting on social media sites Facebook and LinkedIn, and using snowball sampling cite, which included potential participants initially unknown and unvetted by the researcher. Participants were told the nature of the study and that they would receive a \$15 Amazon gift card for participating.

To amplify outreach to the target sample, I also included LinkedIn as a place to recruit participants. The late addition of this professional networking site had an unforeseen impact on my original survey sample. After receiving a higher number than anticipated of potential survey participants (N = 202), it was quickly determined that most respondents to the initial outreach

could not be proven to be student affairs professionals. This became evident after several interviews in which the identity of the respondent could not be connected with a known professional, and many interviewees had extremely short answers in accents that indicated they were not native English speakers. Additionally, the interviews with these characteristics also all chose to not use the video screen during the interview. I assumed that these participants were most likely attracted by the promise of an Amazon gift card as a thank you for participation.

I reexamined the initial respondent results and selected a sample of individuals with .edu email addresses that could be connected with individuals who appeared on the websites of the corresponding institution. The original sample only contained seven individuals with .edu email addresses out of 202 initial responses. This narrowed the list of viable prospective participants out of the initial respondent results considerably. I contacted those seven respondents and also used that pool for snowball sampling, asking individuals to refer me to potential additional interview subjects who might have interest in participating. This created a robust pool of 8 participants, 5 from the original pool and an additional 3 from snowball sampling, who provided rich content.

Participant eligibility for the study was determined via the use of an intake survey of interested respondents to the outreach (see Appendix A). This intake survey asked questions relating to demographics, level of media engagement, and professional position. This allowed me to select from respondents who were as representative a group as possible within the parameters of the study. As my research questions also related to salient identities, I was fortunate that the sample group included participants who come from a variety of backgrounds of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender expression.

Interviews with participants were conducted using the Zoom video conferencing service. Participants were interviewed about their engagement with mediated characters whether fictional, non-fictional, or social media based using an interview protocol developed to elicit responses relevant to the research questions (see Appendix B). Participants were asked to reflect on the depth of their emotional engagement and how it connected to their work-life practice and resilience in the field. Participants were asked to consider if these connections influenced them consciously or subconsciously. Questions also explored the salient identities of participants to examine whether there was a connection between those identities, the parasocial engagement, and resilience in the field. The extent to which these parasocial relationships were used as coping mechanisms was also explored. These questions aligned with the specific topics of the research questions.

I conducted a pilot interview before conducting the interviews to be used for research. To further refine the interview questions and language, the pilot interview was conducted with a friend and colleague who is a student affairs practitioner who also felt strongly connected to tv or social media personalities. I sought feedback during the pilot interview on the clarity of the questions and adjusted the interview protocol, considering what was learned during the pilot interview.

All interviews were recorded. Recordings included audio, video, and active transcript records. Audio records were transcribed from these recordings using the Scribie transcription service. Transcriptions were then coded using Dedoose coding software. Video recordings were deleted after production of the transcripts. However, active transcripts and audio recordings provided via Zoom were kept as a backup to the more detailed Scribie transcript service.

## Sample

Due to the purposive nature of the research question, this study specifically focused on the population of student affairs practitioners within the field of higher education in English-speaking environments. Individuals who held professional positions in the field of student affairs between March 2020 and August 2021, who worked with students, and who experienced distress were the target sample for this study. The goal was to recruit a group of student affairs professionals currently employed in the profession who indicated they were engaged in one or more parasocial relationships during the “Great Distress” period. This allowed me to focus on the impact of the relationship between practice and resilience during the period and avoid examining those to whom this was not a significant mechanism for coping.

I conducted 8 semi-structured interviews with individuals who met the initial interview criteria and self-identified as people who demonstrated a connection with a mediated character, individual, or individuals during the “Great Distress” period. Each participant worked in a college or university located in the United States within the specific field of student affairs and who were providing support to students. The following chart shows the characteristics of those interviewed along with the individual parasocial relationship they identified as having a strong connection to:

**Table 1***Characteristics of Interview Participants*

| Race  | Sexual Orientation | Gender Identity | Parasocial Focus Individual/Character  |
|-------|--------------------|-----------------|--|
| Asian | Gay                | Male            | Sam Wilson/The Falcon/Captain America in the program “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier” |
| Asian | Gay                | Male            | Diana Prince/Wonder Woman across multiple media  |
| Asian | Straight           | Male            | Seth Meyers of the program “Late Night with Seth Meyers”                                 |
| White | Bisexual           | Female          | Unnamed TikTok Influencer  |
| White | Straight           | Female          | Johnny Rose in the program “Schitt’s Creek”  |
| White | Straight           | Female          | Leslie Knope in the program “Parks and Recreation”                                       |
| White | Straight           | Female          | Unnamed podcast and YouTube influencer   |
| White | Straight           | Female          | Saul Goodman/Jimmy McGill in the program “Better Call Saul”                              |

Due to the use of snowball sampling and the small size of the research participant group, I eschewed the use of pseudonyms in the Findings Chapter. As some participants were found through the referral of others, it increases the likelihood of recognition amongst the small group of participants and would not allow for the anonymity of the participants to be maintained.

### **Data Analysis**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted the importance of qualitative data analysis as an iterative process that should have analysis and data collection occurring simultaneously. I engaged in deductive coding, creating a codebook from the key components of the research question. I also engaged in inductive coding as I sifted the information from the interviews to allow new insights to arise from the data. This process of sifting, reviewing, and re-examining the data was done in a cyclical nature. It is important to note that each process and iteration was engaged multiple times throughout the data collection and analysis.

As data was collected, memos were written after each interview and data was reviewed in its initial stages for insights and for possible themes to be explored in subsequent interviews. Engaging in this iterative process helped to narrow the focus on the questions and areas of inquiry that were most likely to generate more rich data in subsequent interviews. Transcripts were generated for review and data analysis. This process was particularly important after the pilot interview.

Data was reviewed as it applied to the research questions. The first review of the material for coding aligned responses with the specific questions they addressed, for example responses to the specific question of whether the relationships impacted practice. Additional coding passes identified themes including excerpts that spoke to the depth of the relationship, themes related to strong personal, identification with characters/figures, and areas of distress management. Codes

for the specific research questions were generated and themes constructed, following the guidelines suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). For example, one participant noted:

We need to change the way that this institution views our office....It's an office that has been kind of the central hub for students no matter what's going on...what are we really to the students? Are we their advisors? Are we their...you know, are we their crisis managers?

This passage was coded under the theme, “meaning making,” as it denotes the participant looking deeply at their work in an effort to understand how it aligns with their values.

The next several cycles of coding occurred as interview data was examined to draw out themes and concepts contained in the transcript. As emergent themes were identified, codes were generated in an iterative process to align with these themes. For example, participants noted management of distress in a variety of different ways, including using humor as a coping mechanism and the intensification of their media consumption. These subthemes were noted, and all were included under the larger theme of managing distress.

The examination of parasocial relationships required exploring the emotional connection to and influence of media characters or personalities on practitioners. This required some amount of self-reflection on the part of participants. These methods allowed a great deal of leeway in examining how individual experiences could be grouped and turned into comparable data despite the variety of different experiences. Saldana (2009) explained that emotion coding can be used to describe subjective qualities of human experiences. This affective method allowed me to identify data that may have seemed to be inconsistent with other statements but are simply expressions of the complexity of the inner lives of participants.



Further coding passes were taken as themes were developed, combined, or re-drafted until final major themes were established. This is what Saldana (2009) referred to as “Theming the Data.” In essence, this means determining what a unit of data is about. Data was then reviewed for common themes and patterns that formed the basis for a hypothesis regarding the influence of parasocial relationships on professional practice and resiliency for student affairs professionals. Data was then reviewed for information that aligned with developed hypotheses to provide examples and counterexamples of the phenomenon being examined.

Finally, coding for the final narrative form occurred. In this stage, the various excerpts were sorted into themes and appropriate examples selected for inclusion to illustrate the themes and subthemes found in the data. Saldana (2009) notes that using this method can be an effective way of using literary methods to effectively tell participants’ stories, which is an effective way to explain the emotional resonance that could come out of the interviews. Data was reviewed for inclusion (in narrative form) in the dissertation.

### **Trustworthiness**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended the use of respondent validation as a means to ensure internal validity. Respondent validation was used as initial findings were developed. Research participants were offered the opportunity to validate whether the findings accurately represented what they expressed during interviews and were able to provide feedback. Appendix C contains the communication to participants to perform member checks. Relevant sections of the research applying to the themes and influence of these relationships were emailed to participants and they were asked to validate if the section genuinely reflects their point of view. They were given the opportunity to clarify if they did not feel it did and these clarifications were

considered in the final interpretation of the findings. While several respondents replied to the email after reviewing the content, none had changes to the data or how it was interpreted.

### **Positionality/Role of Researcher**

It is critical to consider what the impact might be and the lens through which one is observing and interacting with others in approaching not only research, but in most formalized activities in which one is interacting with people and groups in a way that can impact their lives. One of the most insidious aspects of privilege is that those who enjoy it have enormous difficulty in recognizing it.

I hold several identities that impacted how potential participants might be impacted by my research. I enjoy a position of authority at a highly regarded institution that many consider influential in education. As it regards my position specifically, I enjoy some level of regard within the scope of student affairs case management. I have presented nationally on professional topics in the specialty, advised several organizations and institutions as they've established case management offices, served as a committee member in developing professional standards for the field, and currently serve as faculty for the Higher Education Case Management Association, teaching the Case Management Foundations course that many college campuses use as basic education for individuals entering the specialty. Case management is the field within student affairs that is charged with providing support to students in distress withing a college or university.

Since case managers in higher education comprised a significant pool of potential subjects of research, I accounted for the perception of participants that by participating they may access someone with regard in the field in ways beneficial to them that they may not otherwise have access to. In this regard, I took great care to include individual higher education

practitioners who work with students but who are outside of the case management specialty, such as university counseling staff, advising staff, and student affairs professional staff. Ultimately, only two of the participants identified were directly related to case management work, and both at similar positional levels to me.

Additionally, my own multiple identities (race, gender, education) influence the way I experience and view the world and the social issues of the research period. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement and its corresponding national presence is one of the major factors that contributed to the “Great Distress period.” As an African American, I was and am deeply connected to the issues of racism, anti-racism, and the impact of policing on communities of color. In this regard, I was aware of and sought to recognize areas of potential bias as interview subjects discuss these issues in ways that may have differed strongly from my own experience of these concerns. It would be fair to say that I held deep parasocial relationships with many of the victims of race based police brutality that were presented in media during the time of the Great Distress era. Additionally, participants may not have been as forthcoming with their opinions of the movement as they might as my race was likely evident during video interviews, and this could have had a chilling effect on free discussions of the topic of racism. The scope of inquiry needed to be limited to the impact of parasocial relationships on practitioners during this period, and not on how deeply one identifies these concerns as important issues.

I have also intentionally developed a reputation in the field as someone who explores professionally the intersection of higher education and popular culture. I have presented at professional student affairs conferences such as NASPA (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators) on the topic Resiliency, Self-Care, and Why Fandom Matters, and at the ACPA (Association of College Personnel Administrators) on the topic The Insidiousness of

Misogyny & Bullying in Nerd Communities. I have also been instrumental in organizing and presenting at the Comics Conference for Librarians and Educators in collaboration with Comic-Con International for the last twelve years, most recently presenting specifically the panel GeekEd: Lessons from the Snap which included the exploration of students parasocial relationship impacts on their higher education experience in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. This increases my profile as a well-known individual in the field of student affairs for those who have specific interest in the intersection of higher education and popular culture.

As a researcher, I had to listen to the participants without expectation of a particular answer to learn the things I did not already know. It was important to try to examine things that I cannot see from where I currently sit.

### **Limitations**

Some research participants were selected based on availability so there was bias associated with selecting those who I had access to, particularly after the initial pool of participants was somewhat corrupted. In order to collect rich data, I chose participants who identified themselves as having a pre-existing connection to media figures. Those who self-selected for this type of study were those who had a pre-existing parasocial relationship that they found value in. This might limit generalizability to the larger population of student affairs professionals.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Findings**

The “Great Distress” period provided an opportunity to gain insight into how parasocial relationships impact the work of student affairs professionals during a stressful period. Parasocial relationships are emotional relationships individuals engage in with fictional and media characters. Interviews were designed to explore the question of how student affairs professionals who engaged in parasocial relationships think about and make meaning of those engagements and how those engagements affect professional practice and their coping with distress. Each of the interviews was conducted with this question in mind, and eight participants were interviewed.

Several themes became evident as the interviews were conducted. These themes will be reviewed thoroughly in accordance with their relation to the research question and for new insights gleaned during the review not evident prior to the research question development. First, I will examine how these student affairs professionals thought about and made meaning of these relationships through parasocial connections to characters and individuals, drawing inspiration, connections with salient identities, political kinship, acts of service, the questioning of values, and finding community. Then I will explore how those relationships were helpful in managing distress during the “Great Distress” period through escapism, intensified media use, the management of ambiguity, and the use of humor as a coping mechanism. Finally, I will explore how these relationships impacted the professional practice and personal behavior as well as inspired real-world social relationships of the interview participants. Each of these key areas contained corresponding themes that I will detail.

The themes observed were of making meaning of parasocial relationships, in which participants explored why these relationships mattered to them; managing distress with parasocial relationships during the “Great Distress” era, in which participants discussed how they used parasocial relationships to manage the distress during the review period; and impact of the relationship, in which participants examined how these relationships impacted their lived experience.

### **Making Meaning of Parasocial Relationships**

The first major theme was Making Meaning of Parasocial Relationships. This theme detailed how participants experiences with parasocial relationships applied to and impacted their life and practice. This theme contained several subthemes. *Parasocial connections to characters and individuals* describes how individuals made personal social connections with these characters and includes categories describing how these connections differed. These three categories were: *emotional connection*, *role surrogacy*, and *characters in transition*. The next category within that subtheme observed was *drawing inspiration*, which reflects how individual participants were inspired and drew comfort from these relationships.

A subsequent subtheme was *connections to salient identities*, in which participants discussed the social identities that were important to them as individuals, and how these identities connected or didn’t connect to the characters they enjoy relationships with. The subtheme of *acts of service* described the influence of parasocial relationships on acts of service performed by participants in real-world settings. The next subtheme discussed is *questioning values*, in which participants’ relationship to characters and individuals caused them to rethink and reevaluate personal values and value systems. The final subtheme examined in this section is

*finding community*, in which participants' relationships with characters and individuals had an impact on real-world communities in which participants were members.

### ***Parasocial Connections to Characters and Individuals***

As predicted by the theoretical framework of parasocial relationships, all of the participants evidenced a strong connection between themselves and the characters with whom they established parasocial relationships. One participant, when speaking of her connection to the character of Leslie Knope from the television show “Parks and Recreation” noted:

Someone I supervised for a few years, he had to move out of state and he was getting a new job. He gave me a Leslie Knope [collectible]. And he was just like, this is what you've always been to me.

She went on to say, “I feel like she's just been a huge part of my professional identity and my practice as a supervisor and as a ... student affairs professional.”

Another participant noted how his connection with Seth Meyers, the host of the television show “Late Night with Seth Meyers,” was impactful in his well-being during the Covid-19 lockdown. He was a fan of this individual prior to the period of study and continued to watch through the time of the interview. Specifically, he said, “Seth is a listener and he’s listening to other people talk. And that gave us a purpose to think maybe there is some hope in all this. Like we’re not gonna be locked in forever.”

Another participant shared that they were an avid viewer of the television program. “Better Call Saul,” which is a program about a corrupt attorney and his relationship with his family and clients. When asked to think about her emotional connection to the show’s characters,

a participant noted a level of complexity in her connection to characters who evidenced somewhat problematic and anti-social behavior:

You're watching these side conversations [the brothers] have through payphones and things like you do feel this emotion of you still want them to be together and you still want the brothers to somehow reconcile. In the show there doesn't end up being a lot of reconciliation. I do feel like I was left at the end like ugh! I just wanted there to be that. But that's just me who likes happier endings, and they do, in a way, It's not the worst ending. They do get away with some of the schemes that they were trying to get away with. And so there is some like resolution in a way in the end.

She described the shared experience of watching the show as a way she connected with her partner through shared experience in the time of isolation.

The strong connection to characters would occasionally arise in ways that the participants likely didn't notice. For example, some participants frequently used the first name as a familiar form of referring to fictional characters they felt connected to. One participant frequently used the first name in a familiar way for Wonder Woman, the character from film and comic books:

I think that's how I feel that kind of connection to Diana because she always wants to go to talk things out before she goes into action. And I relate with that character very much because I'm very relational in that sense. And my connections with people, with my colleagues, with my family is about that relational element. And so that's how I feel like that kind of connection to Diana, which is probably why watching that movie has had a lasting kind of impact. And the character herself has been a lasting impact for me.

On the whole, this individual used the familiar form of the fictional character's name a full eight times in the interview, as well as referring to the characters Bruce Wayne and Clark



Kent, who are alternate identities for Batman and Superman, respectively, by their first names multiple times as well.

Another participant, in referring to a social media personality she engaged with via the TikTok social media application named Karen, described this individual in very personalized terms:

I always really liked her, and she would put, you know, she had llamas and put little fox hearts on the llamas. And just did a lot of, I would say like characterization of the animals where I kind of felt like I got to know the animals and those types of personalities. And I'm like, darn it, Karen. That's Karen.

All participants described a connection to these characters that held deep personal meaning for them in the real world. Many had pre-existing relationships with media figures that intensified during the “Great Distress” era. All participants experienced intensified media consumption during the period. All participants experienced connections that impacted their lives and behavior that they were able to articulate upon questioning. These connections to the media figures often manifested themselves in several subthemes.

### ***Emotional Connection***

Within the context of participants connecting to and drawing meaning from parasocial relationships, many experienced profound emotional attachments as a component of the parasocial relationship. One participant described how she felt when engaging with the character Leslie Knope from the television program “Parks and Recreation”:

I felt very much like a friend would, like, supportive with her successes, emotional when she was feeling emotional, like, happy and joyful when she accomplished something that you knew she would get done.

Another participant described the importance of his media engagement and its profound personal impact during the period of study:

[Media] became a really important... I would say more important outlet during that phase of life, because I felt like a lot of the other things I might be doing with my time were not an option, and a lot of people I might ordinarily be seeing or engaging with, wasn't "[sic]" able to do that in the same way that I was. And so, yeah, whether it be movies or TV shows or books, ... video games. Connecting with these worlds that felt really big at a time when my life felt ... like my personal world felt really small, was powerful. And then just, again, always feel like I resonate with different powerful and interesting stories, and those stories became, I think, even more poignant in a lot of ways. I needed them more [chuckle] for a period of time here.

### ***Role Surrogacy***

As noted in the theory of parasocial relationships, many participants used media-based relationships as a substitution for real-world relationships that were strained, restricted, or fully absent due to the conditions of the period of study. In other words, these relationships served as a surrogate for real-world connections that were challenged during the "Great Distress" period.

In speaking of Seth Meyers, the host of the late-night talk show, "Late Night with Seth Meyers," when asked to describe the nature of his relationship with this individual, the participant described a relationship not only with the host but with the host's family and the producers of the program, all of whom were more prominently featured as part of the program during the COVID-19 shutdowns. The participant shared:

I would say definitely in terms of friend, like somebody who I could see having lunch with every now and then, if we hosted {a}post pandemic barbecue, family party or

something like that. Like somebody who I would probably want in my day-to-day circle, maybe a text thread from time to time for conversation. It's probably something like that. I don't know if I've ever related to a celebrity like as a family member necessarily, but ... definitely somebody in a good friend circle, I think I could probably see that pretty easily with his family as well and or his producers.

For much of this time, Seth Meyers was recording his shows out of his home's attic and frequently featured his family and producers. This environment provided a more analogous experience to the lived experience of the audience than the traditional studio-produced episode.

Another participant spoke of experiencing cognitive dissonance with a desire to connect to her Midwestern roots but finding significant political differences as challenging during the period of study. Her connection with social media figures from the Midwest provided some resolution to her dilemma:

I don't really want to connect with people that I actually know from my hometown in that way. So being able to get kind of that similar experience of like the vibe of being Midwestern without actually... having that same used to be Midwestern or liberal Midwestern or any of those pieces, I think was an important connection to me, because it's a way to like connect, but not, or to be able to kind of opt-in and out of the pieces that I relate to.

This connection allowed the participant to both reconnect with an important connection to her roots, while maintaining a certain amount of emotional safety from the political strife of the period. For her, the parasocial relationship became a way to resolve cognitive dissonance in her desired relationships.

### ***Characters in Transition***

The nature of the “Great Distress” period was naturally one of great transition for many of the interview participants. Some noted a particularly strong connection to characters who also were experiencing transitions of their own. In discussing the challenges, the character Sam Wilson/Falcon/Captain America faced in the television program, “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier,” a participant who was considering a career change noted:

He's critically aware of things that are not right and okay... And he's also really hopeful, and believes in the potential of something that has been so harmful to him and his communities and his family, which is something that I just... I really resonate with... I spent a lot of time in the last two years [since the start of the “Great Distress” era] just really thinking about, gosh, even more than I might have suspected beforehand, like that's the Captain America I didn't know I needed. And like I really am glad that's where his arc has taken him, and yes, I've just...I've really, really enjoyed connecting to his story.

This participant experienced a great deal of change during the Great Distress era, ultimately leaving his position as a student affairs professional to enter consulting work addressing issues of diversity and inclusion.

Another participant was navigating a new work environment in which he was working from home. He noted the similarities to his most prominent media relationships.

So, I get a lot of my news from late night comedy shows. It's a good way to filter out [how]overbearing media can be no matter what side of the political aisle somebody is [on]. So definitely a lot of late-night comedy shows really got me through that. And I think it was interesting. It's some of these comedians, they would do the show from their houses. One of my favorite ones actually did it from his attic and somebody else did it from the backyard. So it was like an inside joke that a lot of people saw on Zoom is that,

"Wow, my colleagues have really nice houses. My colleagues have nice backyards and living rooms."

For this participant, the broader changes in how and where work was done during the "Great Distress" period was a salient point of connection with his favorite media personalities. Additionally, this is an instance in which the participant typified the parasocial relationship as similar to a coworker or colleague.

### ***Drawing Inspiration***

There was also a great deal of discussion about individuals drawing inspiration from these parasocial relationships. A respondent who identified as a queer Asian male speaking of his relationship with the character Wonder Woman noted:

I think in a lot of ways the stories that prevailed, that at least in my mind were most, I would say, healing would be those moments like [in the film] Wonder Woman 1984 where the rest of the world said yes, we're gonna give in to love and not into [hate].

Whereas that's not quite the case nowadays, at least not during that time.

The participant also spoke at great length of the impact of attacks in the Asian communities and being the target of hate as a result of his Asian identity.

Further, the importance to participants of both personal identity and professional identity was evident. Characters often had emotional resonance across identities, finding connections in both personally salient and professionally salient identities. Another participant spoke directly about being inspired to make a career change by the character of Sam Wilson in the television show, "Falcon and the Winter Soldier." When asked what the impact of this particular parasocial relationship on his life, he responded:

A feeling right, of kind of kinship or comradeship or not aloneness, in an experience very much enhanced by my relationship to this character, my own separate journey of, what is it that is making me, not sort of step in this direction that's scary for me, and yet I know is actually what I need to be doing? Something that will be good for me and for the people that I work with and I impact and the people who I love too, right? That's a huge, positive impact of my relationship with the character.

He went on to elaborate:

I need to rethink what it means to me to be an educator and to be a higher education professional and to shift from this way that.... For 20-plus years [in higher education] ... you work at an institution in a particular role, and you go climb the ladder, and that's how you do it, right? That's how you lead and make change. And my process of getting comfortable with and accepting something that I knew but couldn't really, give myself permission around, is that like, that's one way to do that.

This participant went on to leave his position as a student affairs professional and made a career shift to consulting work.

Some participants noted that the inspiration these relationships brought them had origins before the Great Distress period but continued to be experienced during that time. In speaking of the relationship she enjoyed with the character, Leslie Knope from the television program, "Parks and Recreation" throughout her career, a participant who worked in student government advising shared the following:

I feel like I started engaging with her show. I must have been in college. It was definitely before I even went to grad school. And it just kind of... The connection I drew from it was like, hey, you can do this. Like, don't settle. I was an admissions counselor right after

college and I liked it, but I didn't love it. I was like, I need my master's degree. Like, I wanna move... I'm from New Haven, Connecticut. And I was like, I wanna move out of New Haven. Like, I wanna move to Boston. I wanna get my degree. I wanna be excited about the work I'm doing. And I do feel like she kind of was that throughline through those experiences. So, I feel like that's why I wanted to return to her or to the show when I was like, really questioning, like, what am I doing? Like, you pulled me through grad school.

The participant described the experience as having been “pulled through” by the character, both through graduate school and through the dark times of the “Great Distress” era.

Another participant spoke of drawing particular inspiration from the host of “Late Night with Seth Meyers.” In speaking specifically about coping with the difficulty of the period and drawing meaning he noted:

Seth, coming from a perspective of, we need to aim higher as a country to help those who truly need help. That's where I definitely saw him. Again, I couldn't agree with that more. You know, it's, well, I'm thankful for what I have. I realized the world is not all about me, you know?

### ***Connections to Salient Identities***

Connecting to characters or media figures who shared salient identities with the participant was often mentioned as a potent factor in the strength of the relationship. A participant who identified as a queer male described his connections with two separate comic book characters through this lens. He said:

Any kind of representation of someone who's queer within the media period, I think is something that I will latch on to, because there's so few characters that are explicitly

queer. So, I think for me, I probably latch on to Wonder Woman, because I know that the comic book has made [the characters' sexual orientation] very explicit.

He later went on to speak of his relationship to the character of Batman:

Why I connect with Bruce Wayne, however, is not because of the riches or the money.

It's because I don't have a superpower in that sense. And he uses an intelligence and detective skills to fight crime. And for me, part of my job here is essentially to use my detective skills to do investigations and to find out if students meet particular policies ...

In that sense, I kind of relate. So, I think for me, I think it would be that the connection to have these connections to these particular characters is having that kind of commonality or finding commonalities between them, which allows us to relate better with those characters.

Another participant discussed a connection to the character's Jewish identities, although primarily as viewed through the family of actors that portrayed them. When discussing whether the characters in the television program, "Schitt's Creek" were Jewish like the actors Dan and Eugene Levy who portrayed them and wrote for the show, a participant noted a kinship. She shared, "I think the like Jewishness of the Levy's. I think was probably something I related to ... they're like from New York or like spend time in New York, but that sort of like New Yorker attitude."

In addition to the shared Jewish identity, the perception of a shared identity as New Yorkers, was critical to her identification with these characters.

One participant, who identified as a woman, described a complex set of connections with their chosen media, driven by one salient identity but not exclusive to that. She stated:



I have described my general interest in all media as the genre strong female lead. But you know, more and more often we're seeing women who are, you know, women of color and of all different identities. So, for me, I guess it's still kind of leading with my salient identity as a woman. But beyond that, yeah, I would say that's like my most important one is I follow mostly; I watch, I listen to 98% probably women, trans and non-binary folks. Not a whole lot of men in ... my media circle. And I think a lot of that is, yeah, beyond that identity, less important to me. That's definitely the strongest lead, you know?

For her, the shared identity of someone who identifies as a woman also allowed her access to people who didn't share her racial or gender identities.

Another participant, who identified as an Indian male, spoke of deliberately choosing a character who did not share his most salient identities. In speaking of the character Sara Conner from the film "Terminator 2," he said:

I Love Sarah Connor, ... I always thought that was never about being like a pro feminist, like I'm a woman and everything .... Sarah Connor never quite put that front and center, but it was something that through her actions and behavior ... she's a warrior turned savior of her son, but at the same time ... it was never like, well, I'm doing this because I'm a woman. I'm doing this because I'm trying to fight for humanity and identify as a woman. So, I think cases like that, like that's always a nice way. Like when you look in the way how storytelling is done, it's nice and it's a little bit more uplifting rather than being reminded that you have to appreciate this character because they identify a certain way.

### ***Political Kinship***

The “Great Distress” period was also notable for the political upheaval occurring during the period. Some participants noted this as a factor in their engaging in parasocial relationships. A participant who identified as male spoke of his connection with Seth Meyers on the “Late Night with Seth Meyers” program:

One of those new stories he did was during the 2020 election and then what led after that to the Capitol January 6th insurrection, which we still have not gotten past or over right now. I think it was one of those things where, you know, he had seen like, wow, America is falling apart, you know, just at its core and why.... Like I definitely saw a side of him thinking, Wow, I'm afraid for this country. And in a way it's like, I also fear about this country too. Like, you know, whether it's racial issues, domestic terrorism, the economy, economy is definitely a big one that I always worry about.

This shared fear for the fate of the United States during a tumultuous period was a point of succor for this participant. He describes seeking out Seth Meyers not only on his own program, but also through podcasts and appearances on other television programs. The ability to find agreement around difficult political questions was very important to the participant during the period of study.

Other participants spoke of the importance of these parasocial relationships in very personal ways that showed the depth of their connection. A participant spoke of her political connection to a social media influencer:

I also appreciated that we politically aligned, and so the disagreement or the difference of opinion was really based on practice and what is the best way to go about things. And so, to me, when it's somebody who I think, in good faith, I think is a good person.

The deeply personal meaning participants assigned to these relationships was in accordance with what one would expect to find based on research about parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships' ability to mimic social relationships in a period of time that restricted in person communication took on greater importance as a response to political strife and tumult.

### *Acts of Service*

During the period of study, it was not uncommon for participants to engage in acts of service to their communities, often connected to their parasocial relationships. In considering a change in professional focus, a participant discussed being inspired by the character Sam Wilson/The Falcon/Captain America from the television program, “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier” :

A possibility actually emerged that wasn't there before in the midst of this really difficult time, which I think very much is all about .... And it connects so much to all the things we've been talking about and why Sam's story and character appealed to me so much. And then, the process of developing ... coaching skills, for me was empowering in so many different ways. It was empowering in terms of, just sort of cultivating and recognizing like, ‘Here's a strength that I have that I'm investing in.’ But also, in terms of really thinking about, and getting better at like, how do I use this skill to help other people to find their own agency, to help other people to figure out what it is that they wanna do, how to solve, vexing problems in their lives?

Another participant began volunteering as a coach for high school students. He discussed how the character Wonder Woman, also known as Diana, inspired him to take this step. He stated:

Diana represents what it means to love. And my connection to Diana's character really is kind of like someone who I connect with her because I want to be that person who looks to love as a way to solve problems, as a way to create spaces for people to be included, to help create spaces for people and individuals and our society so people can be who they are. And I use that not only in my work life, but in my personal life as well with all of my friends, with all of the extracurricular activities that I do with my hobbies and everything.

The inspiration drawn from this parasocial relationship caused this participant to seek out opportunities to not only engage in additional social relationships, but also to be of service to others in that engagement.

### *Questioning Values*

The period of study corresponded with a cultural moment in which many people questioned components of their underlying value systems. Many participants in this study found themselves questioning their own professional and personal values and their parasocial relationships helped them grapple with these. In reflecting on the behavior of the character Jimmy McGill from the television program, "Better Call Saul," one respondent drew a parallel between her behavior and that of a character who is notable for a lack of integrity.

I probably will not do the things that Jimmy McGill is doing. But I think he, the relatable piece of him is that there's so much humanness to him. Like I think that there's like parts of us right, that wanna be successful and there's parts of us that will at times compromise and beliefs or views or things we say in the office because we wanna kind of get an edge or something like that. And so, I don't know that I like walked away from the show and then went and like then compromised on my integrity ... I hope not. But I do think like there is that relational aspect of him that I think ... I don't know if it's

specifically the show, but just in general, it's something I think about a lot in my role of like having integrity. But then there are days I walk home and I'm like, I think I kind of gave in, you know ... I think I kind of did this because I wanted to look good to my boss or I wanted to do this. And so, while maybe not nearly on the scale of Jimmy McGill, I do think there's probably ways I do act in that way of like looking out for my own self-interest versus maybe having full integrity in all situations.

This individual looked critically at their motivation and integrity as a result of engaging in a parasocial relationship with a character known for having no integrity. While positive inspiration is also a feature of parasocial relationships, the ability for people to model anti-social behavior through engaging with media figures and measuring their own actions against the actions of someone less ethical, is also a possible outcome of this engagement.

Another study participant reflected on the general culture of student affairs as it related to work expectations during the “Great Distress” period:

I do think the period of “Great Distress,” the period that we're talking about, has totally changed the way I approach work in many ways. And I think one of them I just constantly feel like, I'm saying, like, give people grace ... people are humans. We are not expected to perform optimally right now. No one should be placing these demands. You need to take care of yourself over everything, everyone else ... I'm writing out goals and that is like, one of the top goals ... caring about my community, my team, is number one, setting those boundaries so we all feel healthy. I do think it's a little bit of a culture shift in student affairs that we are all reconciling right now [chuckle]. So, I don't think it's just an individual level ... I think part of the reason I was a perfectionist is because ...

demands were being placed on me to deliver at all levels. And I was reflecting up to those, but also, I was allowing it to trickle down.

One participant described the emotional dissonance he experienced during the period of study contrasting an offhand comment he had made before the pandemic with the then-current state of the country, particularly concerning issues of social justice:

Prior to the pandemic, I had said to my partner ... I think what we need is a good old-fashioned pandemic to kind of cull the population. And now that that has happened, I actually regret saying that because of all the hate that the pandemic has actually unleashed socially ... how do I reconcile that? That was, I think, an impulsive probably way to think about ... how we can solve the world's injustices. And in reality, it created more injustice, more than anything. And so how I kind of negotiate that with myself is by saying, well, I still have a lot to learn to in my life as a human being. I still have that light and dark side. I still have to negotiate that light and dark side of myself. And that's how you counter that is by emulating more of the qualities of Superman and Wonder Woman. And that is trying to clean up the wrong, clean up your own wrong, trying to why would I tell my students and my mentees is it's not about the mistake that you made. It's about the recovery that happens afterwards.

This idea for this participant, that emulating the qualities of fictional characters helped him navigate his own darker impulses, helped him to rectify what he felt was his own ethical shortcomings and direct himself towards a way of aligning himself with more aspirational values.

### ***Finding Community***

One of the sources of distress during the period of study was the social isolation that corresponded with the physical isolation associated with COVID-19 restrictions. Many participants noted a significant change in the level of activity in their social life. Parasocial relationships often served as a direct substitute for this missing social interaction. Of particular note were those situations in which a shared parasocial relationship catalyzed real-world interactions. In discussing an online book club for an author with whom she engaged in a parasocial relationship, a respondent noted:

I can't wait to hear people talk about [the book under discussion in the virtual book club] ... after having felt like isolated for a few months to then suddenly feel like I have a sense of community, it was very emotional for me to then... That's, I think, what made me wanna go every single month, even if I didn't necessarily like the books as much or the conversation as much.

Another participant spoke of using parasocial relationships with social media figures on the TikTok platform to communicate about the stress surrounding the contentious election of the research period. This person shared:

I have my friends that I'm connected to on [TikTok] that are ... real-life friends, but ones that I wasn't seeing that ... I don't have the energy to like give them a call or be on FaceTime with them for an hour. But I have the energy to send them a quick little video of ... this thing made me laugh. And ... those friends kind of re-emerged that I hadn't heard from in a little while that sent me things during the recent election that ... to interrupt your like election doom scrolling. And so, I think it has definitely become, yeah, a coping mechanism in that way.

The modern development of social media and meme culture has provided the opportunity for individuals to create a shorthand for communication when words fail or when contact is limited. The ability to communicate meaningfully to others in social relationships through shared connections of parasocial relationships is one that is only possible via the use of these new technological developments.

### **Managing Distress with Parasocial Relationships during the Great Distress Era**

As participants navigated a variety of different sources of distress, their use of parasocial relationships in relation to this distress took on several aspects. The next major theme examined, *managing distress with parasocial relationships during the “Great Distress” era*, contained subthemes as well. The first of these was *escapism*, in which participants explored how they used the parasocial relationship as a respite from distress. The next subtheme, *intensification of media use*, describes how participants' use of media and engagement in parasocial relationships increased during the review period of March 2020 through August 2021. *Managing ambiguity* was an additional subtheme in which participants explored how parasocial relationships helped them navigate what at the time were ambiguous life or work circumstances. Finally, the subtheme of *humor* as a coping mechanism looked at the prevalence of humor in parasocial relationships as a means of coping with life and work circumstances.

The very nature of the period was one in which society as a whole and individuals, in particular, were experiencing distress from a few different sources. Some of that distress was connected to the identities of individuals, but all participants expressed some level of distress during the period of study. One of the respondents spoke of experiencing the death of two family members, one from COVID-19 and another from Alzheimer's related illness:



Following their actual deaths and the grievance process of all of that, there was a lot of things with our families ... we weren't able to come together for funerals. We really weren't able to grieve. I feel like everything else you mentioned was happening all around us. And it was just an extremely dark time for [my husband and I]. I also feel like we were quarantined in this small apartment together .... And we were supporting each other, but also grieving in our own ways.

In describing everything else, he was responding to additional global stressors including a contentious election, protests around Black Lives Matter, and assaults against elders in Asian communities.

Another participant noted the social toll that pandemic restrictions took on her personal relationships. She said:

[My social life] changed, obviously... Really, we couldn't do anything. I was a very active social person. I relied heavily on my coworkers and my friends usually. And then this really obviously quarantine, we couldn't leave our home. So, I think that was really one of the only outlets that I had . . . There were almost like two categories of shows or media engagement that I had. One was kind of just this like constant revolving door of my comfort shows, I guess I would call them, where I could really just like turn my mind off and just like sit and just watch it, but not fully like engage in it because I've seen it so many times. But then also just I was watching television and listening to podcasts almost at every turn constantly . . . It almost like was the only way I could reconnect to anything outside of the dark time of my work. Thinking about it, I feel like I was heavily engaging in any type of like media consumption all the time, every day for hours on end.

For this student affairs practitioner, who was a highly social individual, media consumption was a form of connecting with others in a socially isolating time. She appeared to engage in old parasocial relationships that provided comfort while additional sources of media consumption appeared to fill the social void they were experiencing during this time.

One participant described the social and physical isolation that came from her specific work environment:

And so, I, throughout the pandemic, continued to work on-site two to three days a week, and so it was having to pivot from a couple of days at home and then a couple of days on-site and being on-site and it being just like a ghost town. And sometimes I could sit there, and my office was in a basement, and I would sit there for eight hours in a basement and not see another person. So, I would wake up, get on a train, 'cause I would take the train into the city to campus, and then sit there for eight hours by myself underground, and then get back on the train and go back home and not see another person except for maybe a couple of people on the train and that's pretty much it.

This is a particularly compelling example of the isolation experienced by individuals during the “Great Distress” era. Even those who physically went to work experienced isolation from social relationships. For this individual, engagement with social media influencers was one way of coping with increasing isolation.

The distress of the period was not limited to the isolation brought about due to COVID-19 restrictions. A participant who identified as a queer person of Filipino descent described the conditions of the time in the aftermath of a series of physical assaults on elder members of Asian communities:

As an API queer male, I definitely felt affected by the events of those particular incidents as they were related to COVID partly because our presidential administration at the time didn't have any qualms to blame what's going on with the COVID pandemic to the API community. And to make that kind of connection so publicly, I think was also very damaging to the API community. And as a member of the API community, I've had a couple of moments where I had to kind of think about, oh, where am I going? Who am I around? How should I keep myself safe? So those are some of the things I would say, incidentally, that I think all together kind of made that whole period of time, and even now, I think a little bit disturbing. Yes. So, my safety, I definitely felt my safety at that time in question.

Particularly for an individual who identifies as Asian during a time members of that community were targeted for anger and violence, this isolation as self-preservation increased the need to connect with others in a safe way. Because parasocial relationships are easily dismissed if they become problematic in a way social relationships are often not, they can be enormously useful in managing distress in difficult times.

### *Escapism*

Escapism was a focus for most individuals interviewed concerning their use of media to manage distress during the period of review. A participant who identified as a female who was a parent shared the following:

You don't have to think about work. The kids were in bed, it's a time we're just enjoying each other. So, it was a time you got, you looked forward to. And so yeah, I think in those moments when you're watching that show and you're excited about what the next show is gonna drop and you're telling your husband, I can't believe it's three more nights until we

can watch the next episode or whatever. I think that is a relief, it's an escape and a relief from the stress.

This type of media consumption would not be uncommon at any point in time, not just in times of distress. The use of media as an implied part of a family's life and experience is commonly used outside of the "Great Distress" era.

Another respondent spoke explicitly about using media to escape work and family stressors in relation to the "Great Distress" era after having relocated to live with her parents:

I would watch the videos on my laptop, and I would leave my phone in the other room because I was like, "This is my time. I don't wanna see emails, I don't wanna get text messages, I don't wanna have to talk to my family or anything like that. And I would go sit in the backyard and put on headphones and I'll be like, 'This is my hour. Leave me alone for this one hour, please.'

One participant spoke specifically and thought deeply about the need for escapism during the period. In discussing the character Sam Wilson/Falcon/Captain America in the streaming program, "The Falcon and the Winter Soldier," he noted:

Going back to that idea of like, not just escapism, . . . there's so many different moments of like empowering parts of Sam's story that . . . are helpful to me, in terms of this as I imagine kind of the life I wanna have, right? And the kind of things that I would like to do that in the midst of circumstances that .... There's so many things that felt out of control, right? Or like out of my realm of influence, as having these reminders, through stories like Sam's that there's never a time you have no influence, right? There's never a time you have no agency, and even things that can seem impossible, right? When you come at it from a perspective of what do you bring rather than what don't you have? That

there's a lot, like you can accomplish amazing things, you can do some pretty remarkable stuff.

The participant went on to describe the number of stressors they experienced during the period from working from home while taking care of a new puppy, managing a relationship, and considering changing careers. The ability to consider their own agency from a new perspective was one that came along with their engaging in a parasocial relationship with this character.

### ***Intensification of Media Use***

For some, their use of media and involvement in parasocial relationships intensified during the period of study, while all participants noted their consumption increased. Participants noted the additional time at home, isolated from out of the home activities was replaced by consumption of a variety of media. One female participant shared, “I think I watched more TV and movies and all of that than ever before, because it was just like, that's where you had the time. That was like a safe activity, and one of the only [safe activities].”

Another person spoke about his use of media in coping during the period.

I already have a pretty thick pull list for comic books. But I also was dependent on media, particularly movies and TV streaming services and whatnot, as a result of that. Because a lot of that time from that period, we really couldn't go out to the public to watch movies. That was one big kind of like shift, and that is changing or how we become social and how we interact with people during that time frame.

The rise of binge watching, defined for this research as watching three or more episodes of a television program in one sitting, was noted as a frequent activity for a participant. “I just kind of binge watched a lot of that during this time. And I think my media increased a lot during COVID too. I mean, number one, I think I was just home a lot more. I wanted to engage more.”

Two other participants described their consumption of media as “binging” specifically, but all participants noted their media consumption increased during the period. This change in behavior was partially due to social isolation requiring individuals to forego public social engagement but this increased quantity led to more engagement in parasocial relationships.

Increased engagement in media other than television increased as well, sometimes in an inversion of normal behavior. In speaking of a shift in her behavior during the period of study, a participant explained:

I used to really get a good night sleep every single night, and then during the pandemic, that really went out the window, especially when you could ... kind of just roll out of bed and start answering emails, and so I would stay up sometimes the whole night, and I would either play video games or watch TV or something like that all night. I think there was one time when I played a video game for 19 hours straight, and then I was like, that's not okay.

As with many types of coping behavior, there can be a fine line between actions that are healthy to engage in and actions that may ultimately have negative impact. In this particular case, the individual was able to recognize that this engagement had crossed the line into behavior that was having a negative impact.

### ***Managing Ambiguity***

The unclear nature of many aspects of the “Great Distress” period caused some participants to experience a discomfoting ambiguity that parasocial relationships helped to alleviate. A female identified participant who connected with animal caretaker-related TikTok content noted:

I mentioned that I tend to move through things quickly, part of that is like a little bit of an emotional blocking on my part. That I kind of get through [media] really, really fast, but also that I do tend to get really emotionally invested in it ... I want to be kind of focused on that story and that thing and moving through it. But then once it's done, I can kind of like wipe that and onto the next thing. So, it's, you know, more temporary piece ... I have enough anxiety and depression naturally, I don't need to artificially insert more of that into my brain.

Another participant, when thinking about their uncertain financial future, compared their own life experience and the global economic struggles to those of movie stars. "I think about like how bad the economy gets for some people, when they think about like, you know, mass layoffs that could happen in any given industry, like sure, a TV star is not likely to have that happen."

The use of these relationships to manage the wide variety of distressing situations people experienced during the period of study is in line with what is known about parasocial relationships. Its specific impact on practitioners of student affairs is, however, a new area of inquiry.

### ***Humor as a Coping Mechanism***

Many participants listed humor as a factor in media use. Even those participants who chose media that was primarily dramatic or documentary in nature often spoke of the humorous aspects of these relationships as a factor in their connection. One participant, who's husband had lost employment and was now serving as the sole working adult in the household, noted a connection to the character Jimmy McGill in the program, "Better Call Saul":

I mean, the humor. He was just witty, he was funny. I think you kind of never know if he's cunning enough to get him into a better situation or a worse situation ... sometimes

he's cunning and then it hurts him. And then sometimes, he's cunning and it helps him, ... I think I am drawn to that character because I think in general, in my life, I've always been ... the rule follower, the kind person, those things, but there's always been that piece of me that like ... I love to pull a good prank. I love to do those kinds of things.

Another participant spoke of how humor helped him relate to the new and more stressful working conditions he was experiencing during the period of study:

I watched a lot of my fair share of old sitcoms that clearly did not exist before the pandemic life. And I think it was interesting. Like, how would these TV shows be like now in a pandemic era? One particular TV show that did make me laugh, and I was like, this show just would not happen now. It was the TV show, "Just Shoot Me," because that entire show takes place in an office. I'm like, yep, all these people would be at home. They would not be in the office ... but it's like some of these people discussing their very deep and personal lives for comedy take place on a closed set, which is an office space. I'm like, people in the office don't do this. But a TV show... but it's still a funny show, and I did enjoy watching that ... I think it was interesting ... I mean like learning not to take life for granted again, I think that was something. As I saw that during this time, a lot of people were passing away, getting gravely ill. And I was very thankful that a house with pretty good internet and at least the outlet to the world to know what's happening. So, I would say, yeah, those are definitely some ways that I kind of looked at the outside world. It's some late-night comedy shows and some old sitcoms that just made me laugh.

### **Impact of Relationship**

The final major theme, *impact of relationship*, contained three subthemes. The first of these was *impact on practice*, in which participants explored how the parasocial relationships



influenced their work life, behavior, and performance. The next subtheme, *impact on personal behavior*, examines how the parasocial relationships impacted their lives outside of work. Finally, the subtheme of *inspiration for social relationships* explored how the parasocial relationships impacted non-parasocial or “real world” relationships participants had with friends, family, co-workers, and others.

Most participants had not thought deeply about the impact these parasocial relationships had on them until directly asked in the research interview. Once prompted, however, many spoke at length about how these relationships had affected them. A participant was prompted to describe their connection to the Sam Wilson character from the television program, “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier”:

[There are] things that I feel like we have in common. We have, again marginalized, minoritized identities, and we move in spaces where we get explicit and implicit messages all the time that this place isn't really for you, this kind of role isn't really a role that's for you or for people like you who experience various forms of injustice and have a strong also internal sense of what's right, and needing to work for what is right and to try to create the world that we want to live in. Even I think, at times where there's these contradictions we have to navigate. And I think especially as a higher education professional of more than 20 years, with a social justice lens and philosophy and ethos, I think there's a lot of things that feel like being Captain America in that role, 'cause you're like, I'm part of this institution that I know is a problem.

### ***Impact on Practice***

Interview participants generally had a hard time initially relating the parasocial relationship directly to practice. After some thought, however, many were able to draw a direct

line between their parasocial engagement and their professional practice. The previously discussed participant who felt a strong connection to Leslie Knope discussed a realization. Leslie Knope is a fictional character in the television program, “Parks and Recreation,” who is typified by an extreme devotion to friendships and an absurdly high level of competence in her work life. When asked if she had emulated the character’s behavior that others might perceive as negative, she responded:

I haven't connected it to Leslie until probably now. I ... This was right before the pandemic. We did a retreat in my office, and I led a team. And it was the first time I thought about this, but I definitely have perfectionist tendencies and extraordinarily high standards. And I get very annoyed when people don't hit that, you know what I mean? When communication isn't there, like, that's always just been my own thing ... I never really thought my standards for everyone else were that high. I think maybe I was kind of inadvertently communicating that. But I thought about that about a million times since and tried to kind of rectify that.

In this instance, the parasocial relationship the participant engaged in with the character of Leslie Knope had a direct impact on not only how she reflected her own behavior but inspired her to change the behavior to improve her work. This type of direct influence of behavior modeling in a parasocial relationship created a circumstance in which the relationship resembles that of a mentor or coworker. This type of “parasocial collegiality” was one of the most interesting components of the participants responses.

A participant who identified as a millennial woman who worked in violence prevention initiatives on a college campus discussed the need to be engaged in the same parasocial relationships as the students she worked with despite her aversion to the subject matter. In

discussing the television program, “Euphoria,” a drama centered on high school students that deals with serious issues such as drug addiction and toxic relationships amongst others. she noted:

It also helped me, I think, cope with my students' stress too, as a way to connect with them. It became even more important. Like I watched all of “Euphoria.” I hated “Euphoria,” but I watched it because all my students were watching it, and that's what they wanted to talk about. And that's part of how they were experiencing the world. And so, in order to like have that connection with them and be able to kind of meet them in this place and like have these conversations, because “Euphoria” was also this really weird experience of vicarious trauma too, that like, I was like, ‘Why are we watching this?’ Like, ‘Why are we doing this?’ And so different from what I normally watch, but it was, these characters and these stories that my students felt so connected to that, they were processing, I think, a lot of their own stress and trauma through those characters. And I had to be able to come to that, to go through that with them and be part of that with them. So, I did watch “Euphoria” on [University]-paid time.

While this particular parasocial relationship doesn't evidence the strength of one in which the participant personally identifies with a character, the participant developed a parasocial relationship that mirrored that which she enjoyed with students and gained insight into the experiences the real-world analogs may have been experiencing.

A participant who engaged in a parasocial relationship with an author that started with her participation in a book club opined about the relationship to her work with students. She noted:

It helped me make connections with students. I think also there was a great value in intentionally reading stories of people and characters whose identities are not mine, because a lot of students don't have my identities. And I think higher education is intentionally recruiting more diverse student populations, and so people like me who are very in the majority with my multitude of identities need to be proactively trying to understand these student ... I think reading these stories and watching the book club where everyone who is also on the book club was never just like a straight white person ... I think listening to their conversations and reading the stories about these different characters helped me to understand the lived experiences of my students without putting an extra emotional and mental burden on them to explain things to me.

In this case, the parasocial relationship allowed for the gaining of insight about issues of diversity in a way that didn't place the emotional weight of teaching on the targets of oppression and allowed the participant to learn independently to impact and improve their practice.

Another interviewee spoke specifically about his parasocial relationship impacting how he interacts with colleagues at work. He said:

I also believe that I aspire to break through some of the difference and to create better connections with folks that might not get along, for example, faculty to administrators. And so yeah, that's something that I definitely aspire in my regular work. And it's not so different from I think sometimes Wonder Woman trying to break through to the villains to look into themselves to do the right thing.

Another interviewee spoke of how the television program, "Schitt's Creek," which centers on a formerly wealthy family trying to rebuild their lives in a small town, resonated with the work she does with students. She related:

So many times, we meet students and like so much has happened before they get to you. And you're kind of like, okay, I acknowledge all that happened. What are we going to do about it now? Like I really love the solution focused parts of our work. Because I think it turns something that feels really powerless into something actionable. And so, I think that's sort of like, "Okay, like take a minute to mourn whatever clusterfuck that was. And then like, now I'm going to get up the next day and like try. I'm going to ... I missed class for two weeks, but I'm going to go tomorrow." I think that's something that I talk to students about all the time.

In this case, the practitioner was able to draw a direct parallel to the lives of characters who she's engaged with para socially and apply it directly to the experiences of students she works with. This is a rare example of someone consciously aware of how parasocial relationships affect their real-world counterparts.

These various connections among participants illustrated how student affairs practitioners made specific use of and drew specific inspiration from parasocial relationships, could provide great insight into practices that impact job satisfaction, and resiliency, and inspire new ways of connecting with students.

### ***Impact on Personal Behavior***

In addition to parasocial relationships impacting their work practice, some participants discussed these relationships as informing and impacting their behavior. In reflecting on her commiseration with the character David Rose from the television program, "Schitt's Creek," a participant drew comparisons to her struggles with a loss of agency during the review period. The character David Rose, through a series of events in the series, is moved from a life of privilege to a life without a great deal of privilege. The participant reflected:

I was living in Massachusetts, [when] they ... purged the voter rolls. I was working at Brandeis and so my address was Brandeis and they were ... 'Oh, we sent something to confirm that you still live there.' And I was like, 'Well, I never got it, it's a huge thing, there's like billions of pieces of mail.' And they're like, 'Oh yeah, that happens to a lot of colleges.' And I'm like, 'So you're telling me that you know that in a state with tremendous amount of colleges, this happens and you're like, cool, you don't care.' But that ... moment of disenfranchisement ... I couldn't vote. And I think that was a very concrete way of seeing the way that bureaucracy keeps out people who can't navigate the system. I have a master's degree and like this is overwhelming. I should be able to crack this code.

A participant spoke of how their personal behavior with their life partner was impacted by her engaging in parasocial relationships.

I think entertainment in general is a good reminder of how much downtime, rest, rejuvenation, can truly [matter], 'cause when, there's seasons when I'm not really hooked to a show. And I think I find in those seasons when you don't have something to look forward to or escape into, engulf a little bit into, it, it's not, I don't know there's some joy that's taken away ... especially for me who can tend to take life a little too seriously sometimes. If I don't have an escape like that, I ... My anxiety spikes and my husband knows because I'll just start cleaning things around the house because I have time on my hands, and I don't know what to do with myself and then it'll stress him out that I'm in that mode. So, he'll say, 'You just need to relax.' And so, I think for me, when I can find a show like this one or really any show that at that, that I really take to, I think that can really end up being a good, I guess self-care piece for me, of just an escape a way to

connect maybe with characters in a way that you can't always connect with people at work.

One participant felt moved through her relationship with a social media personality on TikTok, to embrace her identity more fully as a bisexual woman:

I did become much more comfortable talking about my bisexual identity. I will totally admit, say that that's probably true that that became more comfortable for me. Something that I discussed more, brought up in conversation more, talk to friends about more. And yeah, so that's probably a defined way that it changed my behavior a little bit. It like normalized some conversations that I would have been less comfortable having and provided me some language around some things that I maybe wouldn't have had.

### ***Inspiration for Social Relationships***

An interesting component of the data was that for some participants, the parasocial connections they enjoyed drove engagement in social relationships with real people during a time of restricted contact. A participant described how the character Leslie Knope from the program, “Parks and Recreation” inspired her to send gifts to friends during lockdown:

It was incredible ... I had so many people's addresses already saved, because I had given them gifts before and I was just like, sending things, because I couldn't see people ... that thoughtfulness, I think, has become a big part of my identity with my friends, with the people I'm close to. And so many people were like, oh, wow, I'm just so surprised to receive this. And I was like, it's a tiny little thing. I'm just thinking of you, and I have no other way of really seeing you and connecting with you. But I ... That's a big part of my life, and I wanted to share that. So, yeah, I think in those types of ways, thinking about it now, she definitely has influenced my own behaviors.

Another participant spoke specifically about conversations she had with others during the pandemic around media consumption. She went on to say:

Those shows and those movies and those videos became just such a much bigger part of our lives and how we were experiencing the world, 'cause there was so much less world to experience. I think it definitely became an easy way to have a topic of conversation when topics of conversation were often hard to come by. And many of us kind of felt like we had forgotten how to interact with real people. It was kind of an easy way. And that's always been true of TV shows, that they've become kind of social or cultural interactions or things to talk about. But I think it became even more relevant. And when we think about the experience of, like a big thing for me pre-pandemic was watching *The Bachelor* with friends. And I would have people over and we'd all pile on my couch and open a bottle of wine and talk through the show. And so, losing that connection was really hard.

One participant who self-identifies as a nerd, spoke of the excitement of a new show, “*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*” being released during the pandemic:

Cool, there's this really exciting thing that I'm really excited to engage with. A group of people with whom I had built relationship, like a group of fellow nerds, we did a group watch to let's experience this together, or let's talk about it. Let's figure out how to engage even though normally we'd be sitting in someone's living room. Let's do it this way, and that feeling really good.

Another participant who was the mother of small children spoke of the use of parasocial relationships to further her connection to her children during the period. A program called “*Cosmic Kids*” involved storytelling alongside yoga exercise. She had previously not engaged



with this program herself but found herself doing so alongside her children during the research period. In describing the program, she said:

They tell a story, but then you're doing yoga while you're doing it ... But it's really just like all for kids, kind of thing. But it was like a way for us to do something together, stay somewhat active because it was like winter and COVID. So, in Michigan, you don't get out much ... and they make it into like a story. And then they put fun graphics with it. And then over time, the show got more popular, so they started taking on mainstream stories like Frozen and things like that. And so, you're basically like doing yoga to the story of "Frozen," which is... My kids loved it. So, I mean, it was just like a fun bonding thing for us. And so, I do think ... You know, and I think because I was home where I didn't have the commute, so it probably got rid of probably some of my podcast use... but I think it increased probably more of my television, playing video games with my kids, like that kind of stuff.

## **Summary**

The participants of this study behaved in ways that could be predicted by previous research, particularly in the use of parasocial relationships as coping mechanisms (McNee, 2002), and the way in which parasocial relationships can serve as replacement relationships for those who may be socially isolated (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956). The study also added to the body of research informing how individuals behave in these relationships particularly in the further refinement of a specific type of parasocial relationship, parasocial collegiality. These engagements did mirror those of real-world social relationships in many ways. They took the form of specific types of relationships such as friendship, mentor, and surrogate family member.

The role of parasocial colleague was not one that has appeared in the previous research, and could thus stand further scrutiny.

In relation to the research question, the findings show that the participants did indeed think about and make meaning of these relationships in deep and personal ways. The findings also demonstrate a number of ways these relationships affected both their ability to cope with distress and professional practice in student affairs. The impact on professional practice was both consciously experienced by participants, and subconsciously manifested in ways that were not evident until probed by the research questions. It is through these questions that the results might be interpreted in such a way to draw conclusions that could benefit the practice of student affairs in higher education.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Discussion**

The “Great Distress” era demonstrated and intensified a problem that existed prior to its events: that student affairs professionals experience distress connected to their work at a high rate. The research question proposed for this study was as follows: How did student affairs professionals who engaged in parasocial relationships think about and make meaning of those engagements and how did those engagements affect professional practice and their coping with distress during the “Great Distress’ period? I interviewed eight student affairs professionals who worked with students during the period of study. On review of the data collected, there seems to be some direct answers to this question, as well as a refinement in the way participants made meaning, coped, and applied the experience to their professional practice. In this chapter, I will directly provide an interpretation of the results of the study. I will then provide recommendations based on the results. Finally, I will recommend areas for further study.

The participants in the study made meaning of the parasocial relationships they engaged in in a variety of ways. This is in line with previous research by Horton and Wohl (1956) who first observed parasocial interactions and noted that “the para-social is complementary to normal social life. (p. 223)” It is also evident that the characteristics of parasocial relationships as determined by Hartmann (2016), that parasocial relationships “closely [resemble] ortho- social social relationships” and that “a parasocial relationship can be understood as any social relationship users develop towards characters they only know from the media. (p. 132)” The data collected shows the ways in which these relationships impacted both coping with distress and professional practice among these student affairs professionals during the “Great Distress” period.

Exploring the role that parasocial relationships played in professional practice and as coping mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic yielded valuable information on how professionals worked under stressful circumstances and how they translated those experiences back into the work they do. It also served to put the work of student affairs professionals in relation to the larger culture and gave more context to how this practice changed in relation to global concerns and how individuals coped with distressing global concerns. This information can help shape our strategies for supporting staff in crisis, decreased recidivism in the profession, and strategies for responding to future unanticipated crises.

Left unaddressed, the problem of student affairs practitioners living through the “Great Distress” period as individuals as well as having to take on the role of essential workers providing direct services to students could lead to a perfect storm of distress that could overwhelm them. Lynch and Glass (2019) note that 87% of student affairs professionals had supported a student through trauma at least a few times a year and more than 66% had supported students through serious traumas such as the death of a loved one, suicidal ideation/attempts/completion, sexual violence, severe mental health issues and/or hate crimes and discrimination (p. 9). In their study of burnout amongst educators, Marshall et al., (2016) found that extreme work obligations and excessive work hours led to fatigue, burnout, and departure from the profession.

While these studies were published prior to the “Great Distress” period, a more recent study found that college students reported increased anxiety, stress, isolation and lack of motivation since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Browning et al., 2021). The

combination of the assumed increase in need for student support during the period with the need to manage one's own personal distress likely led to overwhelming distress for practitioners and a severe impact on their resiliency and persistence as professionals in the field.

This overwhelm may have led to a high level of job dissatisfaction, turnover in positions, and professionals leaving the field for positions that only required the management of one's own stressors, and not the additional stressors of their students. This could lead to the loss of a generation of practitioners causing a decades long shortage of qualified personnel to provide these critical services to students. Finding ways to help these professionals cope with the immense stress of their positions is critical to the long-term health of the field.

Managers have the challenge of finding approaches to support these team members during and after a unique trauma with little to no guidance from extant research. Examining this period created opportunities to find new ways to support the next generation of practitioners. Either way, it is critical to be creative and look beyond the traditional ways in which these issues are addressed. Engaging in parasocial relationships may have helped many student affairs practitioners cope with the external social deficit of quarantine and even draw lessons from these interactions that they applied to their work in education.

## **Key Findings**

Three themes became evident through the research: how participants made meaning, how they used parasocial relationships to cope with distress, and how these relationships impacted their professional practice. Each theme detailed interesting findings as related to the research question.

### ***Meaning Making***

Participants drew a great deal of meaning from parasocial relationships in the study. In general, the meaning drawn was in line with previous research around these relationships. Stever (2011) noted, specifically in relation to isolation, that “many see attachment and a sense of intimacy with a celebrity to be preferable to the feelings of isolation they experience otherwise” (p. 2). The isolation of the research period was particularly relevant to this contention.

### Drawing of inspiration

Participants in the study drew a great deal of inspiration from their engagement in parasocial relationship. Time and again, they spoke of parasocial relationships as providing them with inspiration in difficult circumstances. This filling of the social reservoir is in line with research of patients participating in marathon media consumption during health difficulties. This research notes that “media marathoners filled these social reservoirs from combinations of media recommendations, covieing experiences, asynchronous media engagement, character inspiration, media knowledge, and deeper understanding of the human condition” (Perks, 2019 p. 315).

### Political kinship

As explained in the introduction, the period of study was one of heightened political stakes in the United States. Each of the participants were residents of the United States during the period studied and therefore were subject to this heightened atmosphere. Participants’ connection with media figures who they perceived as aligning with their own political point of view as another way in which they made meaning of these interactions. A recent study by Cohen and Holbert(2021) showed how powerful parasocial relationships are within a political framework. The intensity of parasocial relationships voters have with candidates is an important

predictor of support for political candidates and actors. Over and above the traditional predictors of political support, such as demographics, policy and ideology, personal political attributes, and media exposure and use, parasocial relationships proved a strong predictor of political support (Cohen & Holbert, 2021). The strength of this type of relationship in the political realm seems to parallel the strength of parasocial relationships participants evidenced in the study.

#### Connections to salient identities

Participants connected strongly to characters with whom they shared important identity characteristics, particularly from participants who were from historically marginalized identity groups. While many participants did not connect that as a reason behind the selection of the character of focus, they often found a connected, marginalized identity when asked to think more deeply. This is in line with previous research about connections to characters in superhero films. Hall (2020) found that “participants were disproportionately likely to identify a connection between themselves and media characters when they were played by an actor of the same race ... [and that] viewers of audio-visual media are disproportionately likely to identify a connection between themselves and media characters that are portrayed as being of the same gender” (p.422). The participants in this study showed the same proclivities.

#### Questioning values

Participants in the study related the experience of questioning values--both personal and professional--through their engagement in parasocial relationships. This aspect of parasocial relationships is interesting in that it most closely resembles that found in a social relationship. One journal article notes, “[Parasocial Relationships] are analogous to social ties, suggesting that media consumers can experience vicarious cognitive dissonance” (Tukachinsky, 2015, p. 3405). The participants were not only experiencing the relationship as entertainment but

were inspired to question their underlying assumptions about work and life because of the interaction.

#### Finding community

Engagement in parasocial relationships with media figures also fed back into social relationships in a way that was of particular interest in the field of higher education. This social compensation is rooted in the theory that “people are motivated to seek out parasocial experiences to gratify needs” (Rosaen & Dibble, 2016, p. 150). Participants’ engagement with media figures was a way in which they renewed connections socially with colleagues and friends. The participants would gather virtually to discuss media figures and programs that were important to them, and therefore renewed connections in previous social circles, or created new social circles because of the media engagement.

#### *Use as a coping mechanism*

Experiences of distress during the period of study were universal amongst the participants. Each noted the use of parasocial relationships as a way of coping with distress, commonly found both at home and in their work life. Similar to the research conducted by Perks (2019) who examined media use as a coping mechanism amongst those struggling with health issues, the participants used parasocial relationships to refill their “social reservoir.”

#### *Professional practice impacts.*

Participants noted direct impacts to their work through the influence of parasocial relationships. This influence was often not recognized until pressed through the mechanism of the research questions. There was a tendency for participants to view parasocial relationships as collegial. Rosaen and Dibble (2016) noted that “People’s propensities in real-life social relationships ... are largely governed by more enduring traits and not just an ephemeral need for



social compensation.(p. 151)” This was reflected in the participants of this study not only engaging in parasocial friendships with media figures, but in developing a sort of parasocial collegiality, in which the relationship most closely resembled that of a trusted colleague and coworker. The elements of this “parasocial collegiality” were participants who saw the character or figure as role models whom one could model work values and behavior on and who gave through their example, a path to resolve a workplace dilemma or difficulty.

### **Interpretation of Results**

Giroux (2004) noted that film exists as a pedagogy, teaching those who view them about the world. There is a pedagogy present as well that is presented through the lens of parasocial relationships. The participants were taught not only about the world as it existed through the research period, but also about relationships, priorities, and goals.

In addition to the pedagogy of parasocial relationships, participants who engaged in these relationships used them as substitutes for real world relationships, taking the time to reflect on current conditions, drive decision making, and connect with internal emotions. This social deficit model was described in the literature as “research support[ing] the idea that PSI can at times be used to compensate for internal social deficits, essentially providing real psychological benefits from parasocial behaviors (Jarzyna, 2020, p. 8). Within the context of the “Great Distress” period, participants embraced non-traditional communities, connecting with others via shared parasocial relationships. This in turn informed reinforced social relationships for many, giving them another touchstone in which to reach out and reinforce pre-existing connections.

The “Great Distress” period also created a high need for the management of distress. Perks (2019) notes that “social connections facilitated by media marathoning [are] a notable part of ... coping processes” (p. 315). As participants navigated important challenges of the period,

including physical and emotional isolation, fraught familial relationships, and even the death of loved ones, parasocial relationships served as significant sources of support for emotional difficulties through the variety of coping mechanisms participants connected with their media consumption.

The period of study was one in which many study participants experienced ambiguity of purpose, financial security, health, safety, and employment. This ambiguity would usually be managed with the help of social connections. However, during the period of study, this method was severely restricted. The literature describes how this deficit of social connection was addressed by the utilization of parasocial relationships by marathon media consumption during health crises.

Participants continued filling their social reservoirs beyond the initial marathons by convincing others to view media with them (perhaps at a slower pace), communicating with other viewers/readers about the stories, socializing with others after media engagement helped improve their self- concept or anxiety, and integrating certain characters into their self-concept or identity (Perks, 2019). This ambiguity was combined with an isolation that allowed for much less opportunity to commune with, discuss, and seek support from personal relationships. The parasocial relationships served as great opportunities for participants to reflect, compare, and set their own goals and expectations of the period through thoughtful examination of the media they consumed.

As a coping mechanism, humor was notable for its frequency as a subject of the media, and the nature of the parasocial relationships participants sought out. Tukachinsky (2015) notes that “humorous entertainment messages can impact viewers’ attitudes. (p. 3406)” The use of humor seemed to be aligned with a release for participants, allowing them to examine difficult

circumstances with a sense of lightness and with an eye towards the often-absurd circumstances of the period of study.

The research describes parasocial relationships as analogous to real world social relationships. It was important for this study to delineate the distinction between parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships. “Progress in the field may have suffered from a lacking clear distinction of both constructs.” (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008, p. 386) The research indicates that these terms might be further refined in alignment with the multiple types of social relationships that exist. In an era of isolation, many participants sought out and experienced a sense of parasocial collegiality. In essence, not only were they in relationship with the media character, but the characters served specifically as work colleagues to whom they related in a similar manner to colleagues in the real world.

### **Key Recommendations**

While the “Great Distress” period could be seen as a unique circumstance and may be unlikely to be repeated in the near future, it remains the case that student affairs professionals experience distress and isolation throughout their careers and this impacts their success and longevity in the field. The research reveals several ways that colleges and universities can augment their efforts to support professionals who experience distress.

The need for the participants of this study to make meaning of the parasocial relationships speaks to the need for student affairs professionals to make meaning of their work and careers. Student affairs divisions in general and student affairs managers of professionals particularly can institute methods and strategies for professionals--particularly early career professionals--to make meaning of the individual’s professional role and identity, and help them place it in the specific and particular context of their larger life and experience.

While maintaining the consideration of privacy and professional boundaries, a system in which personal values, political kinship, and a meaningful consideration of one's salient identities are deliberately and specifically considered in relation to work responsibilities and project opportunities would be one that would be meaningful for student affairs professionals. Whilst inspiration can be an elusive target, a deliberate effort at providing opportunities for inspiration would increase the connection and satisfaction professionals experienced through their work.

In times of distress, which can be expected in high touch work with students, this research points towards a set of priorities to address highly impacted staff during difficulties. Much of the use of the parasocial relationship was tied with the support of individuals in distress. While the nature of student affairs work, particularly student facing positions, is one in which one is expected to support any number of distressing circumstances, it is clear from the research that coping with that distress is a high need for professionals in the field. When faced with ambiguous circumstances during the period of study, participants with limited social relationships utilized parasocial relationships to cope. During times of distress, particularly times in which there are multiple distress inducing matters to address, student affairs departments and managers should be much more intentional and deliberate about acknowledging the distress, as well as providing direct supports for those experiencing it. Making explicit the access employees have to support resources, the manner in which they can access these resources, the privacy employees might enjoy in the access of these resources and the framework in which they can take advantage of such resources without consequence would further support those to whom distress is an expected and predictable component of their jobs.

Much of the use of parasocial relationships for the participants in this study was also related in connecting with an understanding individual or a supportive community. While workplace boundaries are important to maintain, it is also evident that in times of distress and isolation, the notion of community may change dramatically. In the aftermath of the “Great Distress” period, many institutions have moved to hybrid models for employees, allowing a mix of work from home and work from the campus proper. This has changed how, how often, and where people connect with others in the work community. Deliberate attention needs to be paid to how we create community for those individuals who work in the field, as it is the absence of community that drove the importance of the parasocial connections during the “Great Distress” period.

The workplace is markedly different in the aftermath of this era, and intentional connections must be built to connect individuals with the new workplace. Individuals who work in different locations depending on the day or the project will have less time together and will feel less connected to each other. Finding ways to build teams with common goals can no longer be left to chance. The era where everyone gathered around the water cooler on a Monday morning and discussed the events of the weekend is long past. Unless departments and managers are intentional about creating community, there will be little loyalty to any given position or institution.

### **Areas of Future Study**

This study also provides several recommendations for future research on parasocial relationships. An area with the promise of additional rich data is a study of identity based parasocial relationships and their impact on student affairs professionals. There was evidence that this was a critical component for many of the participants. However, the sample size for this

study was too small to draw meaningful data. Future studies should explore these possible connections for different salient identities.

Additionally, the generalized term such as “parasocial relationships” is a useful tool to describe the phenomenon at play. A further refinement of this concept to include parallels to the diversity of social relationships could be a fruitful next step. This study noted that many participants experienced a sort of parasocial collegiality which was meaningful for this research question.

There was data that noted parasocial relationships like parent/child, sibling, or mentor/mentee relationships. As those distinctions are important to social relationships, they may hold significance to parasocial relationships. The idea that a parasocial relationship can resemble a collegial one begs the question of what type of learning is occurring through this relationship. With a changing workforce that may be working less in the same physical location in the future, the roles of these parasocial colleagues could become more important in establishing professional mores and what behavior is seen as appropriate in a workplace.

As noted in the research, parasocial relationships are defined by their one-way nature. However, the advent of social media has created the possibility of directly engaging with an individual with whom one has a parasocial relationship, thereby changing it (however briefly), to a social relationship. It would be of interest to examine how that changes the nature of the parasocial relationship moving forward, particularly with an eye towards how individuals might be influenced by parasocial relationships to embrace extreme ideologies.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

The “Great Distress” period is one that is unlikely to repeat itself in a similar way soon. The components that made up that period continue to be present in the lives of professionals in

important, if less intense, ways. The experience of managing the distress of students while experiencing it oneself is a consistent experience for many professionals despite the passing of the research period. The ambiguity of life circumstances, financial stability, and connection of self-identity to work has continued past the research period and are likely to be connected conditions for an extended period.

This research sought to deeply examine the impact of a specific and notable period of history on student affairs professionals in an attempt to draw lessons that could be applied to the field more generally. What was discovered was that many in the field experienced difficulty in managing distress and ambiguity during the period of study, and while less intensely, those experiences persist. Through looking deeply at the parasocial relationships these individuals engaged in, we were able to shine a spotlight on the difficult working conditions many student affairs professionals continue to exist and do exemplary work in.

The research showed that institutions and managers can do more specific and intentional work to support professionals in distress through helping them make meaning of their work, intentionally building connections and community amongst peers, and being explicit and direct about the support that can and should be provided. It is through this intentional support that the satisfaction and greater retention of professionals in the field can be addressed, and through these remarkable individuals that students can be best served.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Demographics & Intake Questionnaire

Title of Study – The Pedagogy of Student Affairs Practitioners Parasocial Relationships During the Great Distress Period

*As part of the interview process, I am collecting some basic data to help with understanding patterns in the data. Please take a few minutes to complete the form below. All information you provide will be kept confidential. Physical copies will be scanned and destroyed with digital copies maintained in password-protected, encrypted digital storage only for the duration of the study.*

*In answering the questions, please use the following working definitions*

***Mediated Character*** - Any character or individual you engaged with in electronic, digital, or print media, fictional or real. (Examples include but are not limited to television or film characters, social media influencers, fictional characters, journalists, etc.)

***Parasocial Relationship*** - An emotional relationship with a character or individual that you do not know personally and have no relationship with in real life. (For social media personalities, incidental contact such as a response to a post with a like, retweet, or short text response should still be considered a parasocial relationship.)

|   |  |
|---|--|
| First Name  |  |
| Position in Student Affairs   |  |
| Years in Student Affairs as a professional (excluding graduate positions) |  |
| Age   |  |
| Race  |  |
| Gender Identity   |  |
| Sexual Orientation  |  |

Intake Questions

1. How would you rate your engagement with media during the Great Distress era (March 2020 - August 2021) in comparison to your engagement before this period? (significantly less/less/the same/more/significantly more)
2. Did your viewing of television, film, listening of podcasts, or interactions with social media personalities intensify or increase during this period? (yes/no/same)



3. Did you use these activities to cope with work and/or life stress? (yes/no/same)
4. Is there a character or individual that you experienced a strong emotional connection with during this period? (yes/no/same)
5. Did you remain in the field of higher education during this period? (yes/no)

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Title of Study – The Pedagogy of Student Affairs Practitioners Parasocial Relationships During the Great Distress Period

### Section Content and Questions

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>Welcome, General</p> <p>Housekeeping</p> <p>Items, and Forms</p> | <p>Welcome. My name is Alfred Day. I use he/him/his pronouns. I am a graduate student at UC Davis and will be interviewing you today. Thank you for taking the time to share your views and experiences.</p> <p>Before we begin, I want to make sure all the necessary forms have been completed. Please make sure you provide me with a completed consent form, along with the demographics form.</p> <p>Please let me know if you have any questions.</p>  |
| <p>Consent and Ground</p> <p>Rules</p>                              | <p>Your participation today is voluntary, and you should only discuss things you feel comfortable discussing with me. You may terminate the interview at any time.</p> <p>I will keep all information you provide confidential. To protect your confidentiality, your comments will not be linked with personally-identifying information. I will be video recording our discussion so I can review our conversation later. These recordings and my notes will be stored in password-protected encrypted, digital storage and destroyed at the end of the study. To protect your confidentiality, please use your first name only.</p> |

|                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
|                                 | <p>Finally, your personal identifying information will not appear in the published results of this study.</p> <p>Please respect the following discussion norms.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Confidentiality – what is said in this conversation is private and will not be shared with anyone outside of the confines of this study.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Do you have any questions before we begin?</p>         |
| <p>Purpose of the Interview</p> | <p>The purpose of this interview is to explore your use of media during the Covid-19 pandemic and how you did or didn't engage in parasocial relationships.</p> <p>Parasocial relationships are emotional relationships we have with mediated characters, whether fictional or non-fictional through a variety of media including but not limited to television characters or performers, social media figures, celebrities, etc.</p> |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>Media use during Great Distress Period (Definition of Great Distress Period)</p> | <p>For the purposes of this study, we are defining the great distress period as the period between March 2020 when large-scale quarantine restrictions were put in place and August 2021 when vaccinations became widely available.</p> |
| <p>Strength of Connection to media character/individual</p>                         | <p>Was there one show/character/individual that you gravitated to during this time? If so, who was it and what drew you to them? If show, was there one particular character that was</p>   |

|   |   |
|---|---|
|   | <p>most engaging? (If multiple, ask them to choose one to focus on during the interview)</p> <p>How would you describe your connection to this character/individual? How did you identify with them?</p> <p>What characteristics did this character/individual possess that you found engaging?</p> <p>Does the character share any of your important identities? (Race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) Is this important to you? Do you connect with characters who don't share some connection to your own identities?</p> |
| <p>Influence of character/individual on personal behavior</p> | <p>When thinking about your connection to this character/individual, what did you find relevant to your own experience? How did you relate with their experience? What insights did this bring to your own life and behavior?</p> <p>What was your emotional response to this character's behavior? Was it positive, negative, or a mix of both?</p> <p>What meaning did you make of your time spent with this show/character/individual?</p>   |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>Influence of character/individual on professional practice</p> | <p>How did your media use during the Great Distress help you cope with life stress, work stress? How did your media consumption impact your practice directly?</p> <p>Did the characters' behavior impact your own behavior and if so, how? Can you provide examples? Was there behavior that most people would experience as negative that you found engaging and if so, how did it impact you?</p> <p>Did you find yourself emulating any behavior others might deem as negative? If so, how did you rectify that with your own sense of right and wrong?</p> |
| <p>Influence of media use on resiliency</p>                       | <p>What impact did the Great Distress period have on your life, personally and professionally?</p> <p>Did you consider changing positions or leaving the field? Did you attempt to leave but ultimately stay?</p> <p>How did your relationship with this show/character/individual influence that decision?</p> <p>If no-</p>   |

|         |  |
|---------|--|
|         | <p>How was stress a factor in your leaving your position/student affairs?</p> <p>How did your relationship with this show/character/individual influence that decision?</p>  |
| Closing | <p>Thank you for taking the time to meet today and to share your perspectives as a student affairs professional. Your thoughts and participation are critical this research and I value your perspectives, insight, and experiences.</p> |

## **Appendix C: Respondent Validation Communication**

Good day,

Thank you again for your willingness to participate in my study. The information you shared was extremely helpful for understanding how student affairs professionals used media during the Great Distress period. As I shared during our interview, as part of the research process I am engaging in something called a “member check.” This is an opportunity for you to review my initial writing and findings and provided any additional feedback.

Attached you will find a summary of my initial findings. Please review this to determine if this represents a true or valid interpretation of what you said in the interview.

If you have any feedback or changes, please send that information to me by (Date) (two weeks from send date). If I do not receive any feedback or changes from you by that time, I will assume that I have your information correctly noted and you do not have any suggested changes.

Once again, thank you so much for your time and willingness to share your perspectives. I hope you all have a wonderful rest of the school year.

Sincerely,

Alfred Day