

The Impact of Aging and Counterfactual Thinking on Victim Blaming

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Background and aims

COUNTERFACTUAL THINKING

- Inducing **counterfactual thoughts** about how the victim of an accident could have acted differently **increases the blame assigned to the victim** [1].
- Some of the stories used in [1] involved victims who, though not causally responsible for the accident, engaged in **behavior that could be considered morally questionable** (e.g., at a basketball match, they took a better seat than assigned, and then a falling light fixture broke their foot).
- 1st objective:** Investigate whether inducing counterfactual thoughts also heightens the blame assigned to victims whose behavior was morally neutral.

AGING

- Few studies have directly compared blame attributions by **younger and older adults** [2-3], with differences between the two groups potentially stemming from **differences in values and beliefs** about morally appropriate behaviors.
- 2nd objective:** Explore whether age-related differences in victim blaming would emerge using scenarios where no *a priori* beliefs or values are challenged.

Methods

- Four online experiments were conducted in which **younger** (age = 18-40) and **older adults** (age ≥ 65) read four short stories depicting **accidents caused by faulty products**.
- Main manipulation.** Two versions of each story were created: one **control** [CONTR], one **counterfactual-inducing** [CFT]. In the CFT version, the victim engages in a legitimate action that **deviates from their usual routine**. This prompts counterfactual thinking about how the event might have unfolded if the exceptional element had been normal [4-5].

An example:

Jane is an actress in her 60s. For obvious reasons, she takes good care of her skin, using gentle soaps, plenty of moisturizer, and hypoallergenic makeup. It is important for Jane to use only certain products because she has sensitive skin. One night, during her skincare routine,

she uses her usual face cream, [CONTR]

she uses a different face cream than her usual brand, [CFT]

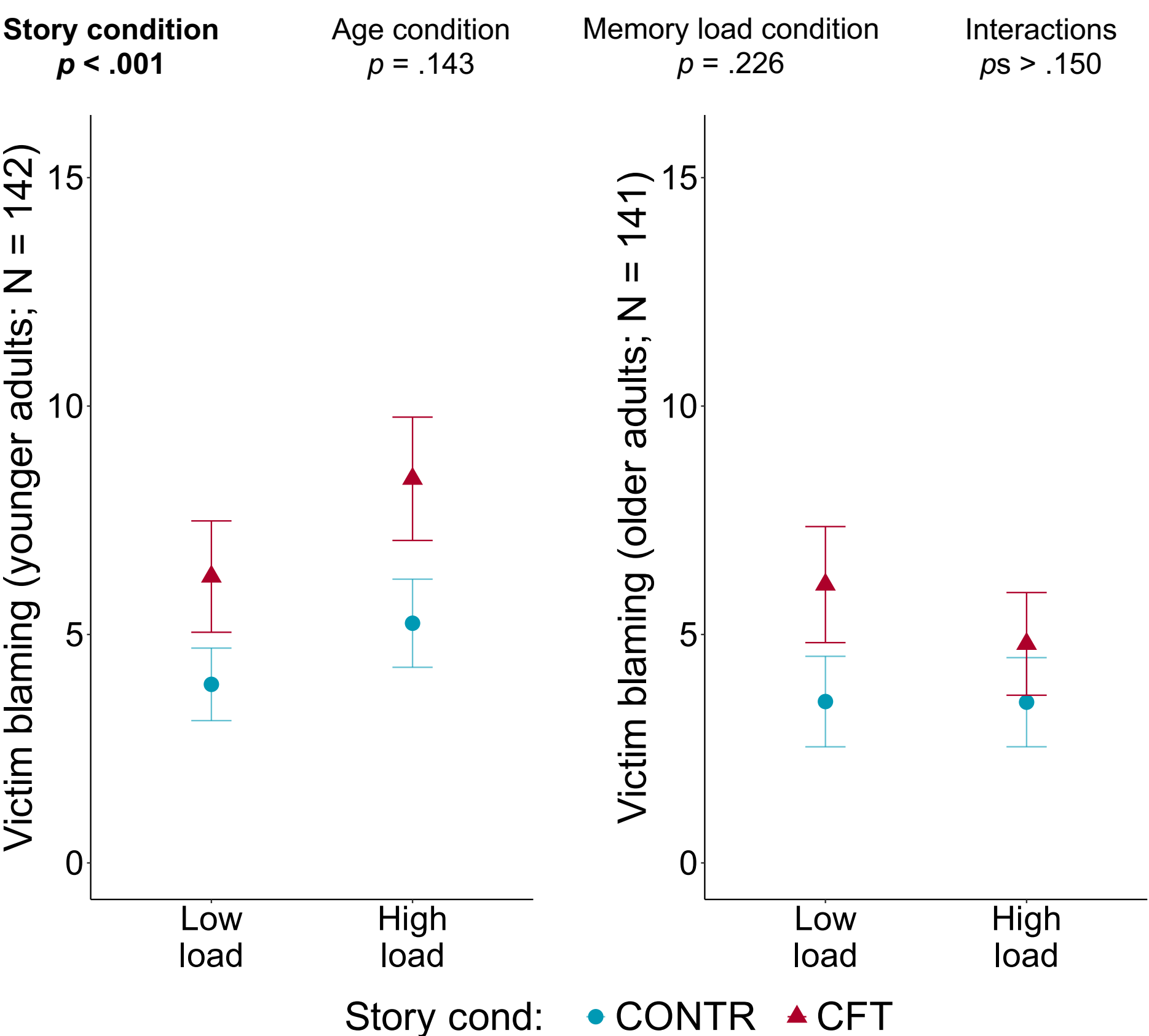
which she bought in a fancy cosmetics shop downtown. However, the next morning, she wakes up with a rash. Unbeknownst to her, the cream was part of a defective batch. She had been scheduled to film a scene for a movie. Instead, she is replaced by a different actress. Jane sues the face cream company for delivering a defective product.

- After reading each story, participants were asked to rate, on a 100-point slider, the **blame they would assign to the victim** [not at all – all of the blame].

- Analyses: **linear mixed models** (error bars in the graphs: SEM).

Exp. 1 – Working memory load

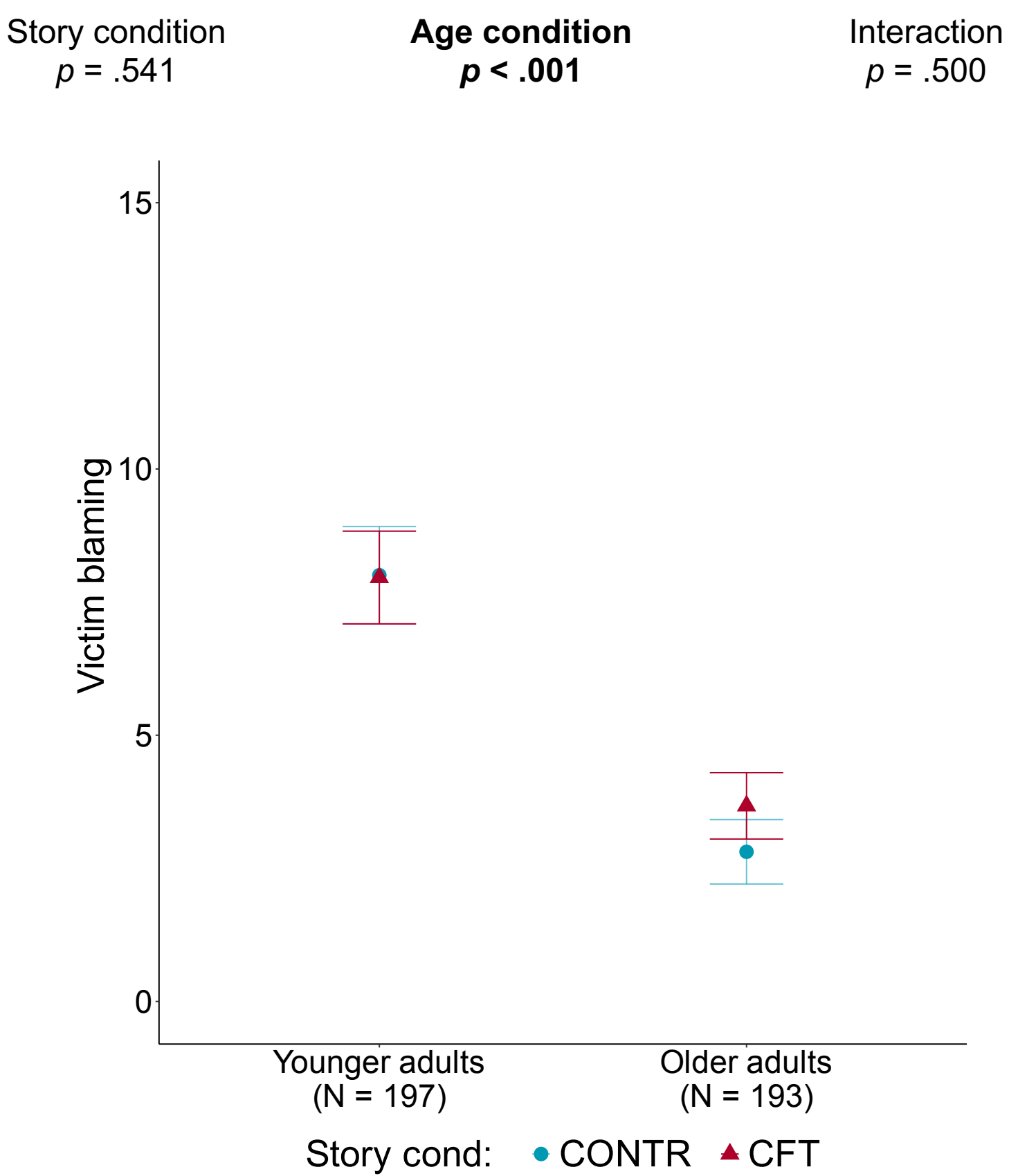
Story version and participants' working memory load (i.e., whether they read the story and provided the rating while retaining a list of nonwords) were manipulated orthogonally within-subject to assess if the results were moderated by this second factor.



Exp. 3 – Reworking Jane's story

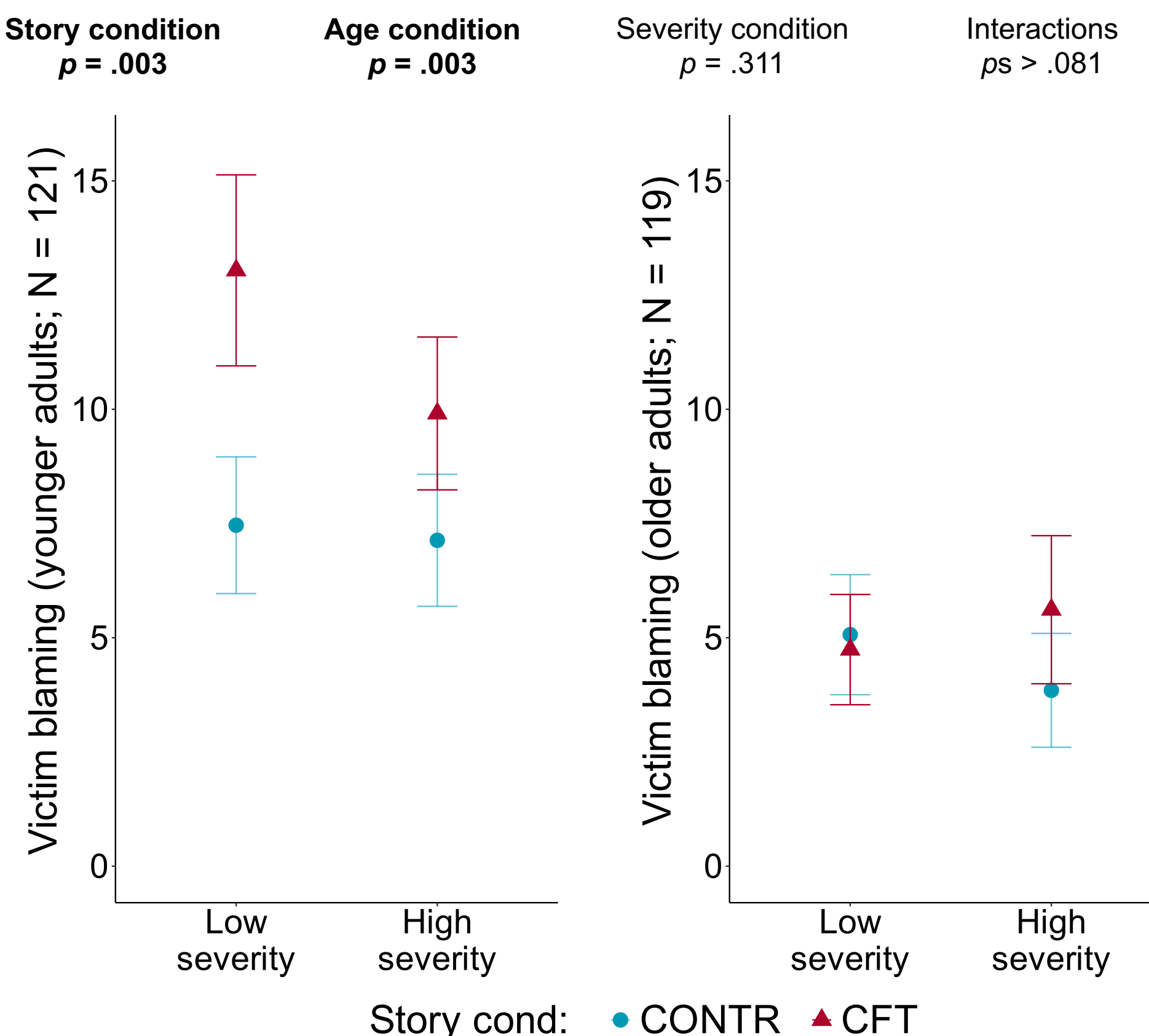
The story condition effect in exps. 1-2 was driven mainly by Jane's story (detailed in Methods), which differed from the others most notably in that the CFT version included an unusual action by the victim prior to a key event.

We revised the story to align it with the others and tested whether the effect persisted.



Exp. 2 – Accident severity

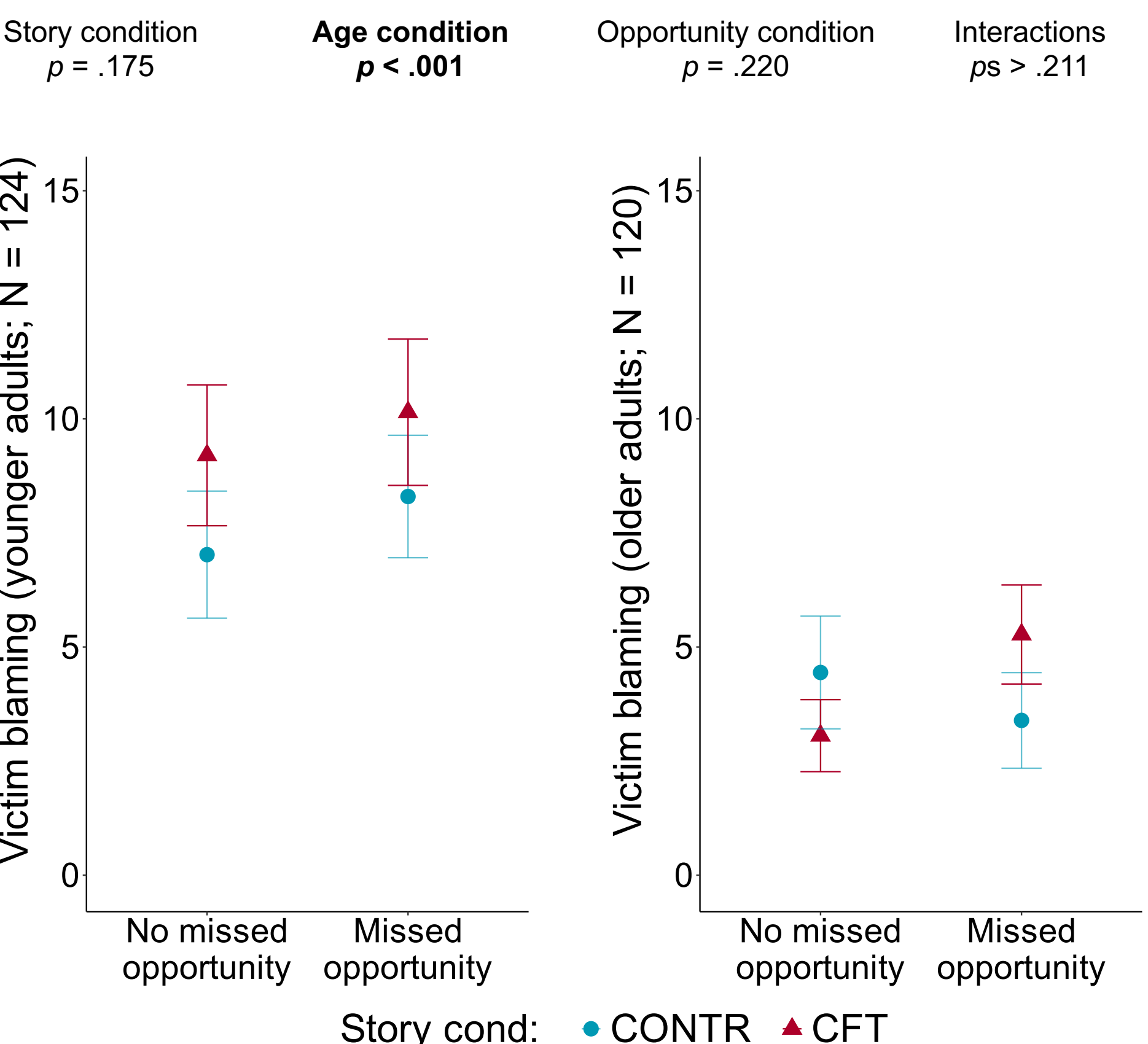
Story version and the severity of the accident consequences (i.e., whether the victim suffered a mild or severe outcome) were manipulated orthogonally within-subject to assess if the results were moderated by this second factor.



Exp. 4 – Missed opportunities

We tested if the aspect that had made Jane's story different in exps. 1-2 was that, in the CFT version, the victim engaged in an unusual action prior to a key event (i.e., shooting a movie), and that the accident had caused her to miss such event.

Story version and the presence of a missed opportunity were manipulated orthogonally within-subject.



Conclusions and future directions

- Overall, inducing **counterfactual thoughts** about how a victim could have acted differently **did not increase victim blaming** when the victim was characterized as having **behaved in a morally neutral way**.

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However, as Jane's story suggests, **as-yet-unknown factors** may make the induction of counterfactual thoughts effective, even in these contexts.

- Overall, **older adults blamed the victim to a lesser extent than younger adults**. This result may reflect older adults' tendency to blame the company that issued the product more than younger adults.

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Previous studies reported that **older adults judge agents causing accidental harm more harshly than younger adults do** [6], and participants could have interpreted these stories as depictions of accidents arising from company negligence.

Materials and contact information

Scan the QR code for a digital copy of the poster and supplementary materials.



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References

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