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Victim Precipitation: Let's Not Silence That Voice

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Cortina, Robello, and Holland (2018) advance a case for the danger of using the *victim precipitation* model in industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology—a model that is interpreted as suggesting that characteristics and behaviors of victims may influence criminals to select them as targets, in effect blaming victims for crimes committed against them. This "victim blaming" found its way into criminology, criminal justice, sociology, and other disciplines, resulting in revictimization and in the exoneration of violent criminals, among other undesirable outcomes. We agree with Cortina and colleagues that these outcomes, then and now, are unacceptable: Victims cannot and should not be blamed for their aggressors' actions, and aggressors should unequivocally be held accountable for their crimes. This extends to workplace mistreatment. Using the operationalizations of generalized workplace harassment, workplace incivility, sexual harassment, and abusive supervision as guides (Rospenda & Richman, 2004, as cited by Cortina et al., 2018; Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Tepper, 2000; Walsh & Magley, 2014), we define workplace mistreatment as any interpersonal interaction in the workplace that creates an oppressively intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment that extends beyond acceptable evaluative and professional actions given situational demands (e.g., poor performance reviews, layoffs during downsizing/mergers/acquisitions, discipline, etc.). Although an unpopular point of view, we maintain that whether or not victims influence the contexts that facilitate victimization

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in the workplace is an empirical question. This research continues to be scientifically valuable, relevant, and practical, and it is necessary to more fully understand workplace mistreatment (Barling, 1996; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). Two principal reasons drive this position: (a) the lack of scientific, data-driven evidence to support the exclusion of the victim precipitation model and (b) the potential harmful premise of its replacement, the *perpetrator predation* model. Elucidating our thoughts on these reasons will occupy our commentary.

Scientific Justification

To the first reason, we are heartened by an aged yet important perspective. Burke (1982) commented, "There is a most absurd and audacious Method of reasoning avowed by some . . . against a fair Discussion . . . because, say they, tho' they would be found without any reasonable Support, yet the Discovery might be productive of the most dangerous Consequence. . . . the Practice of Virtue . . . necessarily depends upon the Knowledge of Truth" (p. 16). I-O psychology is "the *scientific study* of working and the application of that science to workplace issues facing individuals, teams, and organizations" (www.siop.org, emphasis added), and scientific grounds, first, foremost, and likely exclusively, must advocate the evolutionary directions our discipline is to take in the pursuit of knowledge and, hopefully, truth. To the issue of workplace mistreatment, Cortina et al.'s (2018) advocacy of the victim precipitation model's dismissal from I-O psychology seems largely due to its "long and troubled history" and that it has "too many flaws and inflicts too much harm" (p. 89). To advocate its dismissal on these grounds might be that about which Burke warned (see above) when the practice of virtue (i.e., protecting victims from being blamed) is exalted to the search for knowledge and truth (i.e., asking real, honest, and serious questions about and scientifically exploring victim-centered influences in crimes committed against them). Little if any of Cortina and colleagues' stated rationale for the exclusion of victim precipitation is related to the model's scientific merits, such as fit inadequacies, ratio of explained to unexplained variances, statistically insignificant correlations, and other scientifically and statistically based arguments that would call into question model invalidity. As such, scientists with ties to professional bodies such as the American Psychological Association (APA) may have ethical duties to "promote accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness in the science, teaching, and practice of psychology" (American Psychological Association, 2002, p. 1062). As scientists, scientific arguments would more fully convince us that this model's validity and utility in I-O psychology are suspect and its dismissal is the right next step for the discipline to take.

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Readers, and especially victims of all forms of mistreatment, assaults, and the worst types of behavior humans can inflict on each other, must not take the aforementioned position to imply that we are insensitive to the pleas Cortina et al. (2018) make. Certainly I-O psychology must carefully consider and be aware of the history, flaws, and potential harm of the victim precipitation model, which is transparently and soberingly evident in its historical misuse and abuse. However, we only wish to reiterate these as insufficient *scientific* grounds upon which to completely dismiss the model and instead invite scientists to design appropriate studies through which to gather the necessary scientific evidence to answer questions related to its invalidity. Notwithstanding the misinterpretation and subsequent harm that might result from its use, we advocate that the model be retained for scientific investigation and additional, preemptive, and more explicit efforts by its users be made to unequivocally denounce the interpretation of the model as one of victim blaming. To do any less may be tantamount to its tacit endorsement as such.

Perpetrator Predation: More Harm Than Good

To the second reason, and assuming appropriate scientific invalidity to the victim precipitation model can one day be made, Cortina and colleagues advocate the *perpetrator predation* framework as a more suitable model to explain workplace mistreatment, reasoning that mistreatment emanates solely from characteristics endemic to (a) the aggressor and (b) the social and structural context in which the aggressor operates. Cortina et al. (2018) reasoned the strength of this action in that this model, "puts agency and control clearly into the hands of perpetrators" (p. 93), where blame rightfully belongs. Ignoring Burke's (1982) counsel for which we so passionately argued above (to prioritize the search of knowledge and truth above that of virtue), we find little, if any, virtue in advancing a scientific model that removes all sense of control and agency victims may feel over their situations and places them helplessly, unavoidably, and repeatedly in the hands of their perpetrators, both current and future. In our view, the last thing, in theory or practice, that I-O psychology should advocate is a model that strips victims of agency in and control over their victimhood. Instead, we suggest that I-O psychology embrace models that rightfully place blame on the perpetrator but also empower victim to retain agency and control (for example, see Shnabel, Nadler, Canetti-Nisim, & Ulrich [2008] for a wonderful needs-based model of victim empowerment). Setting aside the victim-blaming interpretation that many project on the victim precipitation model, we instead advocate that greater effort be made to recast it as a scientific model, thus reinterpreting factors as influences to workplace mistreatment and not as sources for blame allocation. This can be accomplished by adopting our

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aforementioned suggestion: to permit science to dictate the retention or rejection of the victim precipitation model.

Conclusion

Victims of crimes, in general, and victims of workplace mistreatment, specifically, will and should find no greater allies than within psychology and I-O psychology, respectively. Cortina et al. (2018) narrate the very harmful and troubled history the victim precipitation model has had in uses across various disciplines. However, dismissing the model on those grounds poses two significant challenges. First, I-O psychology is charged with advancing the *scientific* study of work, and the focal article offered little if any scientific evidence to justify the model's dismissal. Second, the proposed alternative model, *perpetrator predation*, does not seem to be an improvement but rather seems to do more harm by suggesting that victims have no control or agency in their victimhood. Although we appreciate Cortina and colleagues' critique of the victim precipitation model, we advocate it stands to be improved, and perhaps even significantly improved, including the ways in which scientists and others interpret its meanings. Guiding us in our thinking, we appreciate Gergen's (2001) observation that, "[t]he point of criticism should not be that of terminating traditions or practices but of helping them to evolve in ways that more fully integrate the voices of the discipline and of its constituents [to] contribute to the intellectual resources of the world" (p. 809). We believe that throwing out the victim precipitation model will, in effect, silence an important scientific voice that needs to be continued to be heard and scientifically investigated.

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It Takes Two to Tango: Victims, Perpetrators, and the Dynamics of Victimization

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As researchers who have advanced victim precipitation arguments in our own work on victimization and job performance (Jensen, Patel, & Raver, 2014), we agree fully with this statement made by Cortina, Rabelo, and Holland (2018): "A victim's traits or behaviors might help us understand *why* the instigator chose that particular person for abuse, but we must always emphasize that it was the instigator, not the victim, who did the choosing and abusing" (p. 93). An overemphasis on victim characteristics does deflect attention away from wrongdoers, and theory that encourages us to consider perpetrator motivation and the social environment is needed.

Yet, we diverge with Cortina et al. (2018) on how much focus is placed on the perpetrator relative to the victim and argue that an overemphasis on the perpetrator, with limited acknowledgment of the victim, masks the dynamic of conflict. In their chapter on workplace aggression, Raver and Barling (2008) note that there has been very little recognition in the organizational literature that aggression emerges as a result of social interaction between victims and perpetrators. This is important because it suggests that aggressive behavior is embedded in a dynamic relationship. In downplaying the social interaction, what emerges is a focus on the victim or the perpetrator, rather than the dyadic spiral (see Andersson & Pearson [1999] for an

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