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Beyond Victims and Perpetrators

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We acknowledge and agree with Cortina, Rabelo, and Holland (2018) that the tendency to focus on victims as precipitators of their own negative workplace experiences (e.g. abusive supervision) presents a problematic theoretical paradigm. Using organizational justice as an illustration, we note that even in fields with an orientation toward victims, similar trends with regard to victim precipitation have still emerged. However, we also argue that although the perpetrator predation approach may help to avoid this tendency and encourage a better understanding of the responsibility for and origins of certain organizational experiences, it may fall short when examining complex phenomena that involve more than the dyad of perpetrator and victim. We suggest that industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology scholars

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might be better served by abandoning the language of victim and perpetrator altogether. Though we invoke these two terms when discussing organizational justice, we ultimately come to argue that researchers should utilize different language that better captures the experience and role of employees in these phenomena.

Victims and Perpetrators in Organizational Justice

Through the exploration of employee perceptions of and reactions to outcomes, procedures, and interpersonal interactions (e.g., Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001), organizational justice scholars have often situated themselves on the side of the victim (see also Rupp, 2011). That is, they tend to take a perspective that is more often concerned with the psychological processes behind perceptions of and reactions to the experience of justice or injustice (see Rupp, Shapiro, Folger, Skarlicki, & Shao, 2017) rather than with what the employee does to engender that treatment. Indeed, this is reflected not only in the proliferation of empirical studies on these experiences (see Colquitt et al., 2001) but even the measures most commonly used to assess experiences of fairness (e.g., Colquitt, 2001).

Though the focus of justice research tends to fall on victims, there has been some research on the processes influencing perpetrators or actors to enact justice. Scott and colleagues, for example, have articulated and provided evidence for a model of actor adherence to/violation of justice rules based on affective and cognitive motives, as well as managerial discretion (Scott, Colquitt, & Paddock, 2009; Scott, Garza, Conlon, & Kim, 2014). Similarly, Johnson, Lanaj, and Barnes (2014) have explored the processes involved in treating others fairly, arguing and finding evidence for the differential impact of treating others fairly on regulatory resources. Other researchers have also assessed the impact of external factors on actor experiences, such as Folger and Skarlicki (1998) with manager behavior during layoffs and Bernerth, Whitman, Walker, Mitchell, and Taylor (2016) with justice climate's impact on actors' affect, satisfaction, and emotional exhaustion. As such, consistent with the call of Cortina et al. (2018) for abusive supervision research to explore why perpetrators engage in abusive supervision, studies of perpetrators or actors in justice focus on the factors and processes that lead to the provision of more or less fair treatment rather than blaming the victim for those behaviors. In other words, the body of research that has accumulated on actors more often than not places the onus for behavior on the actor or the perpetrator rather than the victim.

However, in spite of this tendency toward victims and articulating processes of perpetration without victim blaming (i.e., toward the perpetrator predation approach), the victim precipitation paradigm still can emerge in organizational justice scholarship. Just as victim precipitation focuses on

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how the victim solicits his or her treatment, researchers assessing the impact of individual differences on the experience of justice similarly examine how the victim might be the creator of this experience by his or her tendency to perceive treatment as injurious. For example, researchers who have studied justice sensitivity (or sensitivity to befallen injustice) have argued that certain individuals may be more reactionary to injustice when it takes place and more likely to perceive injustice in a given situation (e.g., Schmitt, Neumann, & Montada, 1995). As such, when researchers examine the effect of justice sensitivity, perceived injustice may be characterized not just as a function of an objectively unfair event enacted by a perpetrator but rather the individual's proclivity to perceive injustice. Though this perspective does not imply that the victim is responsible for his or her treatment, per se, it does suggest that victimhood may be a function of sensitivity rather than the actual perpetration of harm or that the extent to which a victim reacts to a given harm or injustice is a function of his or her own doing rather than a function of the extent of harm done.

As such, even though researchers within the domain of organizational justice at large might orient themselves toward the victim of unfair treatment, certain streams of research within this area might fall prey to theoretical narratives that imply victim precipitation.

Trickle-Down Models and Paradigm Incompatibility

Nevertheless, though organizational justice may in some ways illustrate both perpetrator predation and victim precipitation, there are some areas of organizational justice that are incompatible with this general victim/perpetrator paradigm. This incompatibility, we suggest, calls into question whether other domains within I-O psychology, including abusive supervision, are well-served by a focus on victims and perpetrators as two distinct classes of individuals.

Trickle-down models of justice (e.g., Masterson, 2001), for example, demonstrate this issue. These models argue that justice is not necessarily a dyadic experience in which there is only an actor and a recipient (or perpetrator and victim), wherein the recipient responds to his or her treatment at the hands of the actor and thus ends the experience and provision of fairness. Rather, trickle-down models note that justice has the ability to trickle down through the ranks of an organization such that an individual who is treated unfairly or fairly may extend that treatment to other people. In other words, the person who is the recipient or the victim of another person's treatment may also become the enactor or perpetrator in yet another person's treatment. This status as both actor and recipient throws a wrench into the dichotomy between victims and perpetrators: Rather than an individual falling neatly into a box that either characterizes him or her as a person inflicting

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harm or injustice, or as a person who is the recipient of the harm or injustice, according to trickle-down models, some employees may fit into both.

As the arguments by Cortina et al. (2018) suggested that a victim precipitation or perpetrator predation orientation will influence the party upon whom researchers place the onus for change, there then arises a question of who bears that onus when the phenomenon in question has the potential to trickle down. If a party is both a victim and a perpetrator, toward whom should researchers be orienting their work? If a researcher orients it toward the prime mover—that is, the person who started the fair or unfair cascade of behaviors—it ignores the role that the intermediaries play in transmitting that treatment to others. If a researcher orients himself or herself toward the final victim who does not extend that treatment to others, the researcher ignores the victimhood of those who were treated a certain way previously. Either choice would reflect not only an orientation in understanding the process of justice (or any trickle-down phenomenon) and which factors contribute to it but also would imply an onus for change upon whichever party is characterized as an actor, a responsible person, or a perpetrator.

Furthermore, the characterization of a party as a victim or perpetrator carries with it connotations of blame (or blamelessness) that might also influence how that party is viewed. If middle managers who are neither prime movers nor final victims in a trickle-down model are characterized as actors or perpetrators, it would suggest that they have the power to change their behaviors—as is implied in the discussion of Cortina et al. (2018) with regard to abusive supervision. However, such an approach would ignore their own victimhood and the impact of others on their choices. On the other hand, characterizing them as victims might neglect the role they play in choosing to extend their treatment to others. It might recuse them of blame and put the focus of study not on their psychological processes and motivations for engaging in unfair or fair behavior but rather the processes that impact those who treat them in such a way.

What to Do With Victims and Perpetrators?

We suggest, given the illustrated problem with trickle-down models of justice, that I-O psychology scholars might be better served by exploring organizational phenomena not by characterizing parties as victims or perpetrators. Rather, we argue that scholars who study complex phenomena operating in systems with multiple players should consider using language that is more neutral and flexible. For example, using the terms "actor" and "recipient," or "agent" and "target," might better characterize the party's role within the organizational phenomenon being studied without connoting blame or responsibility. Doing so would accomplish certain goals that are not incongruent with those pursued by Cortina et al. (2018).

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First, different terminology would remove the mutual exclusivity implied by the terms "victim" and "perpetrator." Presumably, if the shift toward focusing on victim precipitation in abusive supervision inhibits the understanding of the role of perpetrators, then the study of the simultaneous experience of both victimhood and perpetration would be difficult to achieve. By suggesting that parties are either in a state of victimhood *or* perpetration, scholars also imply that there cannot be other parties whose identities are characterized by elements of both involved in the phenomenon studied. By focusing on someone as a victim or a perpetrator, we might ignore critical precursors or outcomes to their own experience. For example, if a party is characterized as a victim, it might preclude the study of how they react to their victimhood in a way that might also later make them a perpetrator.

Second, more neutral terminology potentially removes the dynamics of blame—dynamics that were similarly problematic with the victim precipitation approach. When the victim precipitation approach is utilized, it suggests that the onus for change or intervention is on the victim rather than the perpetrator, or that victims are responsible for what happens to them (Cortina et al., 2018). However, the same can be said for the perpetrator predation approach. This approach might characterize the perpetrator as the sole party responsible for his or her actions, and therefore ignores the other factors or individuals that led the employee to become a perpetrator in the first place. As such, the terms "perpetrator" and "victim" might lead researchers to come up short when trying to determine who to study and how to intervene in their experience. Characterizing certain individuals as perpetrators might orient researchers to focus their study and subsequent interventions on perpetrators solely rather than potentially other individuals or entities that led them to become perpetrators in the first place. Researchers might be better able to approach and intervene with these issues, however, if the connotations of blame were removed when describing the parties involved—such as "agent" and "target."

A more nuanced understanding of organizational phenomena would therefore be provided by other terminology. This would not only benefit the understanding of justice but also domains within I-O psychology such as ethical leadership (see Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009), psychological contract breach (Bordia, Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2010), and even abusive supervision itself. As demonstrated by Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne, and Marinova (2012), abusive supervision also has the potential to trickle down and impact lower-level employees. If this process is common across organizations, the description of parties as "victim" or "perpetrator" might fall short even in the study of abusive supervision. By approaching people not as victims and perpetrators, per se, we can better characterize them as individuals occupying a complex space in which they

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are recipients of others' treatment but also decision makers and actors in their own right. In doing so, we better conceptualize and understand not only the employee's experience but also how to affect that experience in a positive way.

Conclusion

We concur that although the perpetrator predation approach is an improvement upon the victim perpetration approach to abusive supervision, it has some limits as it extends to other areas of I-O psychology scholarship. Using organizational justice, particularly trickle-down justice, as an illustration of the potential limitations of this approach, we also argue that different terminology might better serve organizational scholars at large. Namely, more inclusive language—or rather, language that is not mutually exclusive across parties—might aid in the study of various organizational phenomena in which parties occupy multiple spaces simultaneously. We do not advocate for victim precipitation under a new label. Indeed, the focus should be on the individual who has the discretion and ability to make decisions that impact others. However, we do encourage a shift of labels so that we may better understand employees who are not only the recipients of others' behaviors but also the actors or enactors in the experiences of others. By doing so, we appreciate the complexity of employee experiences rather than limiting them to a dichotomy of victim or perpetrator.

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Who Is the Wolf and Who Is the Sheep? Toward a More Nuanced Understanding of Workplace Incivility

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Cortina, Rabelo, and Holland's (2018) perspective on studying victimization in organizations is a welcome contribution to workplace aggression research. We share their believe that considering a perpetrator predation paradigm may advance and proliferate research on issues related to gender harassment, bullying, mobbing, and other explicitly overt forms of victimization where the intent to harm is supposedly clear. However, we propose that, if blindly adopted, neither the dominant victim precipitation paradigm nor the

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