Justice and the Moral Lexicon

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As Nick Haslam (this issue) describes, democratic senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan proposed in 1993 that a pattern of “defining deviancy down” threatened to normalize harmful and pathological behavior in the United States. What Haslam omits is that in the controversy that followed, conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer (1993) claimed that the opposite pattern was at play—people were warping perception of everyday behaviors of average Americans as abusive and pathological. In his response, Krauthammer expressed his bewilderment at the rising acknowledgment of child abuse (“The real deviants of society stand unmasked. Who are they? Not Bonnie and Clyde but Ozzie and Harriet” [Section II, para. 2]), date rape (“So much then for . . . normal heterosexual relations” [Section V, para. 1]), and prejudice (“Under the new dispensation it is not insanity but insensitivity that is the true sign of deviant thinking, requiring thought control and reeducation” [Section V, para. 9]). Nearly a quarter century later, Krauthammer’s concerns have found a moderate restatement in Haslam’s own proposal: “concept creep.” Although the details of the cases differ in important ways (e.g., child abuse is now the criterion against which Haslam compares domestic abuse in order to undermine the latter), the primary theses overlap. The debate over the moral lexicon is not new. Because the boundaries of words conveying harm and suffering and their usage—moral semantics and pragmatics—have real consequences for how people live their lives, everyone has a stake in how these boundaries are drawn. Thus, controversy over the moral lexicon is inevitable.

Classification of events as harm, for example, as cases of abuse, bullying, or prejudice, usually depends on the implicit or explicit identification of one party as the offender or moral agent and the other party as the victim or moral patient (as outlined in the dyadic account of morality; Gray, Young & Waytz, 2012; Schein, Goranson, & Gray, 2015; Schein & Gray, 2015; and philosophical analysis of the concept of harm; Rabenberg, 2015). Moral agents are held responsible for causing harm to moral patients (Gray & Wegner, 2009, 2011; Gray, Schein, & Ward, 2014). As Haslam presents the problem of concept creep, too many people are being identified as moral patients, victims of abuse, bullying, and prejudice, and in turn too many people are being identified as moral agents, perpetrators to be punished. Of course, Haslam pays some attention to the potential repercussions of failing to identify real instances of abuse, bullying, and prejudice. In this vein, Haslam follows Pinker (2011) in recognizing that the “rights revolutions” and increased sensitivity to harm account for much moral progress and traceable declines in violence. Nevertheless, Haslam’s primary focus is on the potential repercussions of expanding concepts of harm, for example, abuse, bullying, and prejudice, to include a growing number of personal grievances—the problem of concept creep.

Haslam argues that increasing subjectivity in how harm gets defined is a key part of the problem. If harm can exist purely in the victim’s mind, that is, emotional or psychological harm, then wounds are less likely to be verifiable, rendering the concept of harm and the meaning of unelaborated harm-related terms “diffuse and ambiguous” (p. 8). Haslam describes a push within psychology toward definitions that entail taking victims at their word that they’ve experienced bullying, abuse, and prejudice, leading to a parallel movement within the general public toward victim-defined, case-by-case conceptions of harms. It appears that Haslam is concerned about who will believe the people claiming they’ve been abused if the concept of abuse loses its meaning. But the rest of Haslam’s argument seems to sidestep concern about possible victims. Instead, Haslam’s concern centers on the possible offenders. He suggests that people who are not actually “bullies” risk losing their jobs if infrequent, unintentional mistreatment of others or “most interpersonal frictions” (p. 15) can be defined as bullying or abuse. Furthermore, Haslam suggests that characterizing adults who might be hurt by “angry arguments” (p. 10) as victims of emotional abuse trivializes the experiences of more vulnerable victims, namely, physically and sexually abused children. In other words, Haslam points to other potentially harmful consequences of concept creep—Haslam himself appeals to an expanded concept of harm. This underscores the inevitability of controversy over the moral lexicon. People appeal to the concept of harm to defend what they believe is just, Haslam included.
Because people identify instances of harm and victimization to defend against perceived injustice, concern about harm and victimization can’t be straightforwardly mapped onto a particular political agenda. Nevertheless, as Haslam notes, opposing concerns about expanding versus shrinking concepts of harm often seem to reflect the stances of conservatives versus liberals. Our own research indicates that, although attitudes about harm and suffering appear to be rooted in political orientation, it is more likely that individual differences in moral values account for opposing attitudes. Specifically, people who endorse a cluster of values that include loyalty to the ingroup, obedience to authority, respect for tradition, and preservation of spiritual and sexual purity (deemed “binding values” for their purported function to bind and build groups together; Graham et al., 2011; Graham, Haidt & Nosek, 2009; Haidt, 2012) are also more likely to direct moral scrutiny at victims. For example, people who highly endorse binding values ascribe more responsibility and blame to victims of sexual and nonsexual violence and are more likely to rate victims as “tainted” or “contaminated”—judgments consistent with definitions of stigmatization as involving a “stain” of infancy or reproach. These patterns of moral judgments are rooted in basic causal judgments. In a psycholinguistic task measuring implicit ascriptions of causality, people endorsing binding values were more likely to select the patient argument of agent–patient transitive verbs as causal (e.g., they were more likely to choose “she” when asked to choose between “he” or “she” to resolve “Jack raped Sue because . . . .”; Niemi, Hartshorne, Gerstenberg, & Young, 2015).

Why might putatively moral values be associated with such a pattern of results—judgments of victims of diverse crimes (sexual and nonsexual) as responsible and blameworthy? Binding values involve moralization of loyalty to the ingroup, respect for authority and tradition, and concern about spiritual and sexual purity. Unlike “individualizing values” that involve moral concern about harm and fairness—and that are more universally endorsed across the political spectrum (Graham et al., 2011; Haidt, 2012)—the sorts of transgressions that violate binding values include many more events outside the scope of prototypical harm. These events, such as betrayal, disobedience, and gender norm violations, don’t fit as neatly within the dyadic account of morality in which an agent harms a patient, where the agent and not the patient is responsible and blameworthy (Gray et al., 2012; Schein & Gray, 2015). In general, people high in binding values may adhere less closely to the agent-harms-patient template when attributing causality and responsibility in the moral domain, resulting in an inversion of typical dyadic morality: condemnation of victims. Note though that, although people who highly endorse binding values also report being politically conservative, links between endorsement of binding values and attributions of causation, responsibility, and blame to victims persist when controlling for self-reported political orientation. Thus, it may not be wholly useful to characterize opposing concerns about harm and victimization as reflective of a conservative or liberal agenda. Instead, we may gain more insight into the roots of apparent political divides by closely examining moral values and their underlying cognitive architecture (Niemi & Young, 2015; Niemi & Young, 2014).

Haslam’s contribution is timely, because concern about concept creep has gone mainstream. Scholars have taken to the popular press to question the appropriateness of sensitivity measures in the university setting, for example, trigger warnings and trainings to prevent microaggressions (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Similar to Haslam’s concern about the dangerously subjective definitions of harm, these commentators have framed sensitivity measures as contrary to truth-seeking. Such arguments suggest that if people are reluctant to speak their minds because they fear appearing (or actually being) offensive and hurtful, then the resulting discourse will be inauthentic and therefore unproductive. We suggest another view, more relevant to likely targets of abuse, prejudice, and bullying (e.g., minorities in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, abledness, women in professions dominated by men): There already is a large segment of the population—comprising various nonelite, low-status people—who may be reluctant to speak their minds and are ignored in public discourse. Truth is under fire but for a different reason: People on the margins or in positions of disadvantage are more at risk of being systematically discredited (Fricker, 2007).

Our view is that sensitivity measures—which may involve expanded concepts of harm—legitimize the experiences of vulnerable people who are more likely to have experienced victimization; they remind people with established authority and power to protect and respect those without it, addressing traditions of mistreatment. As such, sensitivity measures function as part of the countervailing force against bias in higher education and other public settings that has limited the ability to define truth to those who happen to be in positions of power. Moreover, sensitivity measures reflect respect for the rights and dignity of all—which falls in line with the intuitive jurisprudence of dyadic morality (Gray et al., 2012)—and which has only recently emerged in public moral awareness. Indeed, in the 1940s and 1950s, an emphasis on “victim precipitation,” how victims bring upon their own victimization, represented the norm; it took organized efforts across party lines to produce real change, which has included, for
example, the integration of victim services into the
criminal justice system (Ben-David, 2000; Parker,
2008; Young & Stein, 2004). Nevertheless, research
reveals that victims still commonly fear and expect
stigmatization (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009), and many
report pervasive self-directed feelings of contamina-
tion and taint (Badour, Feldner, Babson, Blumenthal,
& Dutton, 2013; Badour, Feldner, Blumenthal, &
Bujarski, 2013; Fairbrother, Newth, & Rachman,
2005). Even now, being a victim still carries the risk
of social quarantining and blaming (Niemi, in press).

Like Haslam, these commentators (Lukianoff &
Haidt, 2015) also defend their position by proposing
that increased sensitivity to harm itself perpetuates
harm, noting, “According to the most-basic tenets of
psychology, the very idea of helping people with anxi-
ety disorders avoid the things they fear is misguided”
(Section “Fortune-Telling and Trigger Warnings,”
para. 6). Rather than serving to protect people from
harm, these commentators propose that trigger warn-
ings prevent the sorts of surprise exposures to trou-
bling stimuli that actually alleviate fear and trauma
through the process of habituation, for example,
exposure therapy. These commentators thereby
bemoan the “coddling” of the American mind and
present the classroom as the optimal exposure therapy
environment, in the spirit of the philosophical tradi-
tion of Stoicism, that is, it is right and good for the
weak to take every opportunity to toughen up
(Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Setting aside questions of
whether it is ethical to engage people in adversarial
“treatments” without their consent or to treat class-
room discussion as behavior modification, we pose
the further question of whether, in general, negative
events with positive side effects are to be cultivated.
Of course, offenders don’t deserve moral credit for
their role in building the character of their victims.
Being bullied in elementary school may have made
many a fifth grader ever more prepared (e.g., emo-
tionally resilient, empathetic, agentive) for middle
school and beyond. This positive side effect, how-
ever, need not change our moral views about the
wrongness of antagonistic harm-doing nor constrain
empathy toward people’s experiences of suffering.

How can we bridge the divide involving concern
about possible victims versus concern about possible
offenders? We suggest that appropriate acknowledgment
of victims’ experiences of harm and offenders’
harfeful actions need not send society spiralling into a
culture of “impotent victims” and character assassina-
tions, as Haslam fears. We suggest that this outcome
would obtain only in the presence of a separate but
related problem, aptly invoked by Haslam as “moral
typecasting” (Gray & Wegner, 2009), whereby people’s
identities as victim or offender are inflexible and
unchanging. Others have identified this issue outside
the scope of moral psychology as well—for example,
Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) and clinical psychologists
(Dunmore, Clark, Ehlers, 2001; Ehlers & Clark, 2000)
on the cognitive distortions of “overgeneralization”
and “global and stable attributions,” social psycholo-
gists on “contagion” cognition (Nemeroff & Rozin,
1994; Rozin, Millman, & Nemeroff, 1986), and sociol-
gists and anthropologists on “stigmatization” (Goff-
man, 1963; Yang et al., 2007). Ideally, acknowledging
a harmful agent (i.e., offender) and harmed patient
(i.e., victim) in one instance should not preclude the
possibility that the offender can take steps to repair the
relationship and grow as caring moral agent or that the
victim also has responsibilities to care for himself or
herself and others across various situations in various
capacities. The premise that people are not solely
moral agents or moral patients is reflected in the de-
velopment of alternatives to conventional criminal justice
proceedings such as restorative justice. Restorative jus-
tice programs may involve, for example, empowering
victims to express to offenders how the crime affected
them, giving offenders the chance to express their
remorse, and bringing community members together
to bear witness and commit their support to affected
parties (Sherman & Strang, 2007). Such an approach
to dealing with transgressions isolates the offending
act in time, potentially releasing both parties from
some of the constraints of moral typecasting. Evidence
of the benefits of restorative over conventional justice
approaches includes reduced posttraumatic stress
symptoms and reduced desire for violent retaliation in
victims, as well as reduced recidivism of offenders of
serious crimes (Angel et al., 2014; Sherman & Strang,
2007; Sherman, Strang, Mayo-Wilson, Woods, &
Ariel, 2015).

We certainly agree with Haslam that individuals
would do well to cultivate moral agency and take
responsibility for their own well-being to the extent
that they can. However, the thrust of our critique is
that historical and current patterns of systematic injus-
tice render abuse, bullying, and prejudice cultural-level
problems that disproportionately affect some groups
more than others. Expanding the concept of harm
beyond its traditional boundaries enables targeted
“victim” groups to be legitimately recognized as
experiencing mistreatment. Haslam’s view that recog-
nition of harm has been taken too far ignores historical
and cultural context, and hinges on a pessimistic belief
he shares with both past (Krauthammer, 1993; Moyni-
han, 1993) and current commentators in the popular
press (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015): American society is
one step away from sliding down a slippery slope into
dysfunction and low accountability (or, in early 1990s
speak: “deviancy”). Let’s remember, though, that real
social progress has occurred and continues. We have
seen significant reductions in acts of violence and
explicitly uncivil attitudes, attributable—in no small
part—to increasing recognition of previously
disregarded people as legitimate moral patients of harm (Pinker, 2011). We propose that acknowledging harmful acts, in the past or present, need not co-occur with moral typecasting—confining people to roles as perpetual victims or offenders. Worthy endeavors for future research include describing precisely how moral typecasting is instantiated in language conveying moral events, investigating the consequences of self-and other-directed moral typecasting on behavior, and then ultimately addressing the problem of moral typecasting. “Language is a wiki” (Pinker, 2007, 2014): a continuous editable resource that reflects the contents of moral cognition and the functioning of culture. Ongoing restructuring of the moral lexicon—if it is a project with diverse contributors—has the capacity to continue to empower the most vulnerable and ensure the growing reach of civil treatment and freedom from harm.

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