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## 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 infamy 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 non-elite, 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 contamination 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 anxiety 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 warnings prevent the sorts of surprise exposures to troubling 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 tradition 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 classroom 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., emotionally resilient, empathetic, agentive) for middle school and beyond. This positive side effect, however, 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' harmful actions need not send society spiralling into a culture of "impotent victims" and character assassinations, 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 psychologists on "contagion" cognition (Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994; Rozin, Millman, & Nemeroff, 1986), and sociologists and anthropologists on "stigmatization" (Goffman, 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 development of alternatives to conventional criminal justice proceedings such as restorative justice. Restorative justice 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 injustice 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 recognition 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; Moynihan, 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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