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Who Blames the Victim?

Gray Matter

By LAURA NIEMI and LIANE YOUNG   JUNE 24, 2016

IF you are mugged on a midnight stroll through the park, some people will feel compassion for you, while others will admonish you for being there in the first place. If you are raped by an acquaintance after getting drunk at a party, some will be moved by your misfortune, while others will ask why you put yourself in such a situation.

What determines whether someone feels sympathy or scorn for the victim of a crime? Is it a function of political affiliation? Of gender? Of the nature of the crime?

In a recent series of studies, we found that the critical factor lies in a particular set of moral values. Our findings, published on Thursday in the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, show that the more strongly you privilege loyalty, obedience and purity — as opposed to values such as care and fairness — the more likely you are to blame the victim.

These two sets of values have been the object of much scholarly attention. Psychologists have found that when it comes to morality, some people privilege promoting the care of others and preventing unfair behaviors. These are "individualizing values," as they can apply to any individual. Other people privilege loyalty, obedience and purity. These are "binding values," as they promote the cohesion of your particular group or clan.

Binding and individualizing values are not mutually exclusive, and people have varying degrees of both. But psychologists have discovered that the extent to which you favor one relative to the other predicts various things about you. For example, the more strongly you identify with individualizing values, the more likely you are to be politically progressive; the more strongly you identify with binding values, the more likely you are to be politically conservative.

Our animating insight was that these two clusters of values entail different conceptions of victims. Proponents of individualizing values tend to see a dyad of victim and perpetrator (a victim is hurt, a perpetrator does the hurting). Proponents of binding values, however, may see behaviors as immoral even when there is no obvious victim — for example, the "impure" act of premarital sex or the "disloyal" act of flag burning — and may even feel that doing the right thing sometimes requires hurting others (as with honor killings, to pick an extreme example). So we hypothesized that support for binding values would correlate with a greater tendency to blame victims.

We conducted several studies, involving 994 research participants. First we examined how their moral values related to their tendency to stigmatize victims versus to see victims as injured. We provided minimal descriptions of victims of various crimes — rape and molestation, stabbing and strangling — and asked the participants how much they considered the victims as "injured" or "contaminated."

While we expected that all participants would be more likely to view sexual-crime victims than non-sexual-crime victims as contaminated (which is indeed what we found), we also found, surprisingly, that the more strongly people endorsed binding values, the more strongly they considered any victim to be contaminated — regardless of the nature of the crime.

Furthermore, the more people saw a victim as contaminated, the less they saw that victim as injured. Throughout, we controlled for other variables and found that it was moral values — binding values, in particular — and not political orientation, gender or religiosity that determined the results.

In another study, participants read descriptions of specific cases of rape and robbery and rated both the victim and the perpetrator on how "responsible" they

were for the outcome, as well as how much a change in their actions could have changed things. We found that the more strongly people endorsed binding values, the more they strongly they attributed responsibility to victims and the more they saw victims' behaviors as influencing the outcome. We found the opposite pattern for people endorsing individualizing values.

Can anything be done to change people's perceptions of victims and perpetrators? In another study, we explored whether nudging people to focus on perpetrators versus victims could affect people's moral judgments. We did so by placing either the perpetrator or the victim in the subject position in a majority of sentences in descriptions of sexual assault (e.g., "Lisa was forced by Dan" versus "Dan forced Lisa"). We then asked the participants to assign percentages of blame to the victim and perpetrator.

Consistent with our previous findings, the more participants endorsed binding values, the more blame they assigned to victims and the less blame they assigned to perpetrators. But we also found that focusing their attention on the perpetrator led to reduced ratings of victim blame, victim responsibility and references to victims' actions, whereas a focus on victims led to greater victim blaming. This was surprising: You might assume that focusing on victims elicits more sympathy for them, but our results suggest that it may have the opposite effect.

Victim blaming appears to be deep-seated, rooted in core moral values, but also somewhat malleable, susceptible to subtle changes in language. For those looking to increase sympathy for victims, a practical first step may be to change how we talk: Focusing less on victims and more on perpetrators — "Why did he think he had license to rape?" rather than "Imagine what she must be going through" — may be a more effective way of serving justice.

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