Victimhood: The Most Powerful Force in Morality and Politics

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Abstract

Victimhood drives morality and politics. Morality evolved to protect from victimization, and today morality still revolves around concerns about victimhood and harm. Unfortunately, liberals and conservatives often identify different victims, creating political division. In this review of the psychology of perceived victimhood, we demonstrate its power and complexity. First, we look at evolution to explore why victimhood is so powerful, highlighting one neglected fact about human nature: humans are more prey than predator. Second, we examine three different definitions of what victimhood is based on understandings of individuals, groups, and morality, and how these definitions of victimhood can set the stage for conflict. Third, we explore how victimhood matters in judgments of others. It forms the core of moral judgments: people condemn acts based on how much these acts seem to victimize others. People also typecast others as victims or victimizers. Fourth, we review when people see *themselves* as a victim, and how this licenses selfishness. Finally, we show how victimhood inflames moral and political division, but also how it can bridge divides through sharing and acknowledging experiences of suffering.

Victimhood: The Most Powerful Force in Morality and Politics

Victimhood is the most powerful force in our moral minds. Like the force of gravity, it shapes the fabric of our moral universe, pulling our judgments and distorting our perceptions. Like nuclear forces, victimhood can provide tremendous moral energy, fueling explosions of outrage and simmering disagreement. Like magnetism, it orients our moral compass, providing an invisible guide for our intuitions. Victimhood is the foundation of our ancient moral mind and drives modern debates about politics. The power of victimhood is both everywhere and inescapable.

But victimhood has a problem: no one likes it. The idea of victimhood is connected to being attacked and exploited, and people prefer not to think of themselves as victims. Yet the truth is that over 1.2 million violent crimes occur in the United States each year (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2020) and in 2022 approximately 23 people in 1,000 were victims of violence (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2023). We are all capable of being victims at some point in our lives, and some communities have faced a long history of truly horrific and objective victimization (e.g., the Jewish community during the Holocaust). However, victimhood can also come in smaller forms. For example, we can feel victimized when we believe we are treated unfairly or unjustly. After buying a car, it is easy to think that the dealership ripped you off, or at work, you may think you were unfairly passed over for a promotion. Beyond our own feelings of exploitation, we can also feel aggrieved when our friends and family are harmed, or when our identities are ignored or questioned. Because people have a broader sensitivity to being attacked, we are all concerned with becoming a victim, which makes victimhood a powerful force in all our minds.

Some argue that victimhood is such a powerful force in our understandings of the world, that it is harming social discourse, especially on college campuses (Campbell & Manning, 2018; Haidt, 2017). They suggest that those who feel victimized claim moral

superiority and bully those who disagree with them (Campbell & Manning, 2018). Political pundits like Milo Yiannopoulos have even called victims of abuse "whining selfish brats" (Strudwick, 2017). While feelings of victimhood could drive us away from difficult conversations (e.g., Haidt, 2017), they may also motivate us to confront hard issues and create social change (Hadjiandreou & Cameron, 2022), such as when sexual assault survivors created the powerful #MeToo by sharing their experiences of previous victimization (Daniels, 2023; Norton & Saldanha, 2022).

Whatever you think about victimhood, it is undeniably an important force within people's minds. The power of victimhood has been studied piece-meal in the field, but we argue that the study of victimhood needs to be central to our understandings of morality and politics. Victimhood lies in the middle of our moral judgments, it explains many of our most intractable conflicts, and it can also help bridge divides.

Here we present a review of victimhood in morality and politics, focusing on our own work but also connecting threads of work across the field. This review has 5 parts. First, we briefly cover *why* victimhood is so important, drawing from evolutionary arguments. Then we explore *what* exactly victimhood is, exploring various definitions of victimhood. Next, we explore *how* victimhood matters in judgments of *others*; then we review how victimhood impacts the behavior of the *self*; and finally, we examine how victimhood drives—and might help overcome—*moral and political division*.

1. Why Victimhood Matters: Human Nature

Victimhood matters so much in our moral minds because we are all—deep down—worried about being harmed. We think of ourselves as ruthless hunters and apex predators and although it is true that we have conquered nature and developed complex societies, our human nature is more grounded in victimhood than we often believe.

1.1 The Human Nature Fallacy

There is no doubt that modern humans have achieved amazing things, and largely transcended the natural world. We dam giant rivers for power, keep cool on the hottest days with air conditioners, and develop medical treatments to rebuff hundreds of diseases. We stand at the very top of the food chain, eating any creature that we wish, but does this mean that our human nature is inherently predatorial? What does the evolutionary record say?

At first glance, the evolutionary record of humanity seems to paint us as predators, with mental and physical adaptations that seem to make us fearsome hunters. We can throw spears long distances (Young, 2003) and can run great lengths to chase animals to exhaustion (Lieberman, 2021). We were also able to overcome many of nature's toughest challenges, including building fires to keep warm and cook meat (Wrangham, 2017) and by using our advanced brains to coordinate, strategize, and plan (Saniotis et al., 2013).

Further evidence of humanity as predators seems to come from one of the most famous discoveries in anthropology from the mid-20th century. Raymond Dart was a famous anatomist and anthropologist who discovered the first *Australopithecus africanus* fossils (an extinct hominin related to modern-day humans). It was known as the "Taung child" because it was found near the mining town of Taung, South Africa. Dart suggested that the Taung child had been butchered and eaten by a conspecific, painting our hominin ancestors as killer cannibals. Dart used this evidence to argue that our ancestors were "Killer Apes," who were aggressive and ruthless, more victimizer than victims (Dart, 1925). His other analyses concluded that this species of early hominin were avid hunters who used tools as weapons and could kill some of the largest and most dangerous animals of the time (Dart, 1925).

These discoveries set the stage for the idea that humans have always been predators, constantly on the hunt and thirsting for destruction, but this evidence was not as solid as we once thought. Humanity did not have stone tipped spears until relatively recently in evolution, and our hunting skills were often poor (Hart & Sussman, 2005). It is also not clear

how widely such weapons were used throughout humanity and whether using weapons like stone tipped spears could effectively kill large beasts (e.g., elephants). Further, while human anatomy makes us skilled at endurance hunting (Bramble & Lieberman, 2004), this kind of hunting only works in very specific situations, such as during the hottest times of day and when animals are running through sand, leaving obvious pawprints (Liebenberg, 1990). Importantly, modern work casts doubt on Dart's central findings that *Australopithecus africanus* were ruthless cannibalistic predators (e.g., Derricourt, 2009). The Taung child was not killed by another hominin, rather, the marks of "butchering" that Dart discovered were simply nicks made by an eagle beak (Berger & Clarke, 1995). The work of other anthropologists reveals that our hominin ancestors were not fearsome hunters but instead were constantly hunted by large cats (Gabunia et al., 2001), wolves, and cave bears (Dunn, 2012). Megantereon (a prehistoric species of saber tooth cat) and leopards were "primate killers," preying on both early hominins and baboons (Lee-Thorp et al., 2000).

Physically, humans are relatively weak, with no fangs, talons, or tusks. Our physical weaknesses make hominins nearly defenseless against predators, explaining why scientists estimate during this time nearly 10% of hominins were killed by predators each year, a number comparable to herd animals like deer (Hart, 2000). Our ancestors likely lived in near constant fear of being prey—of being *victimized* by predators.

These experiences of victimization formed the basis of human nature, driving our "fight or flight responses" (Russel & Lightman, 2019), and imprinting a fear of falling prey within our minds. Unfortunately, the deep roots of predation are under-appreciated in understandings of modern human cognition. Many evolutionary psychologists (e.g., Anderson, 2001; Barrett, 2021) are quick to acknowledge that we have "stone-aged minds," yet fail to acknowledge that in the Stone Age, we were pre-occupied with threats. However, some research does touch on this fear. Developmental psychologists have pointed to the

importance of children needing to learn to detect threats throughout human history (Boyer & Bergstrom, 2011). Others have highlighted how our existential fears of dying (i.e., death anxiety) stem, at least in part, from evolutionary processes evoked from threats from our predators, known as predatory death anxiety (Langs, 2004).

Recognizing the persistent fear of predation in human evolution is important for an accurate understanding of human nature and especially important for understanding the power of victimhood. A species that is constantly worried about threats from the natural world is also likely to be worried about threats from other people.

1.2 Banding Together for Safety and Danger

If humans were so weak and defenseless as a species, how did we stay safe from predation (i.e., avoid the threats of victimization from the wild)? We banded together. While humans are easy to exploit alone, it is much harder to prey on large groups, explaining why many prey species stay together (e.g., schools of fish or herds of antelope). Large group formation gives protection to individuals through protecting the weak (e.g., old or sick and the new offspring) and reducing the statistical likelihood any one individual will become prey (Javarone & Marinazzo, 2017). Such group formation is advantageous evolutionarily speaking as it protects the species and increases the likelihood each generation will live long enough to reproduce.

Similar to herd animals, humans banded together to avoid potential threats of predation (Javarone & Marinazzo, 2017). Forming these groups provided several advantages, including having more eyes vigilant for predators and decreasing the likelihood any single individual would be the unlucky one attacked (Gomes & Semin, 2020). Group living also allowed early humans to share resources (e.g., food; Boyd & Richerson, 2009) and technology (e.g., tools and medicine; Boyd & Richerson, 2009) and later allowed for a division of labor where individuals held expertise in specific tasks that led to productivity and

invention (Apicella & Silk, 2019). In all, group living not only helped humanity develop advanced societies, but it also reduced the likelihood of victimhood by predators.

While group living was especially helpful at protecting individuals from predators, with it came new potential victimization, from other humans. Living in large social groups meant humans had to trust one another, relying on each other for resources and protection (Boyd & Richerson, 2009). However, other humans could not always be trusted. They could commit violent attacks against us over disagreements (Wrangham, 2017), they could steal resources from us (De Buck & Pauwels, 2022), or betray our trust (e.g., breaking commitments; De Buck & Pauwels, 2022).

While anyone could be a potential threat, some people are also more likely to be threatening than others. For example, personality traits like aggressiveness or dispositions towards psychopathy may have driven some to harm others in their community (e.g., steal resources or show violence; Woody, 2019; Torres-Rouff & Costa Junqueira, 2006). While these individuals may have been advantageous to have within your group in times of intergroup disputes (e.g., over territory) as they could be ruthless fighters (Park, 2013), they could also victimize people within your community.

The threat of other people harming us requires that we develop a cultural innovation that allows us to psychologically police the behavior of other people, and to motivate communities to expel or punish wrongdoers from their groups. We developed *morality* to stop other people from victimizing us.

1.3 The Evolution of Morality to Reduce Victimization

To better protect ourselves from being victimized by other people within our groups, humans evolved a sense of morality. Morality is a set of norms established within a society to encourage cooperation and discourage aggression and selfishness. Morality protects the interests of the group and reduces the likelihood of group members harming one another

(Boehm, 1982). While morality condemns many things, all moral systems around the globe generally seek to limit victimhood by prohibiting aggression and violence against ingroup members, as well as discouraging rampant selfishness (Curry, 2016; Graham et al., 2013).

Moral concerns are especially relevant when communities and societies are under threat because that is when harm is most imminent. For example, in times of scarcity (e.g., famine), people are more likely to be driven to harm others (e.g., steal food to feed your own children) (Prediger et al., 2014). When groups face threats like natural disasters or disease, people are more likely to focus on their own (and their kin's) self-interest (e.g., Cui et al., 2023), even if it is at the expense of the group.

Societies try to combat the human tendency to be anti-social when under threat. For example, places with a history of threats to survival are more likely to be "tight" cultures (Gelfand et al., 2011), with stricter norms about morality than "loose" cultures (Triandis, 1989; Gelfand et al., 2011). In tight cultures, people are less accepting of moral deviances (e.g., Uz, 2015) and hold more rigid moral codes (Jiang et al., 2015). The fact that tight cultures form in response to threats (e.g., territorial conflict, resource scarcity, environmental threats) reinforces the idea that our moral codes are connected to concerns over potential harm and victimhood.

Of course, there is variation in morality both over time and across societies (Wheeler et al., 2019), and there are situations where some forms of aggression and violence are permissible. For example, war involves murder, but also provides the chance to avoid the threat of annihilation or enslavement from a rival group. Even harm within groups can be morally good if people see it as reducing overall harm. Honor-based cultures often allow circumscribed violence like duels (Fiske & Rai; 2014; Handfield & Thrasher, 2019) because they efficiently resolve disputes, isolating the conflict between two people and preventing it from spreading to their allies (Leininger, 2003). Whether people abhor violence or sometimes

accept it, the central goal with morality is protecting ourselves (and those in our group) from being victimized.

Not only does morality reduce the likelihood of direct victimization (e.g., assault or murder), but it also helps us indirectly avoid victimization by encouraging cooperation. One theory, *Morality as Cooperation* (MaC; Curry, 2016)*,* argues that morality evolved to encourage people to work together and help each other, consistent with the importance of cooperation across cultures (Curry et al., 2019) and the general link between morality and cooperation (e.g., Rai & Fiske, 2011; Sterelny & Fraser, 2017). The importance of cooperation also lends credence to the importance of victimhood. Without cooperation, people become harmed. Historically, if societies did not cooperate when collecting and sharing food, the sick, young, and old would often die from starvation (Boyd & Richerson, 2009). If soldiers did not cooperate with one another, they could risk serious injury or death on the battlefield (Dörfler-Dierken, 2013), and a lack of cooperation in certain societies during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., not wearing masks, not following social distancing orders) exacerbated the spread of the virus and the deaths of many (Aravindakshan et al., 2022). Thus, cooperation is often integral to reducing the dangers of harm and victimization.

Another theory called *Moral Foundations Theory* (MFT; Graham et al., 2013) argues that morality has evolved to guard against a specific suite of threats, including direct harm (e.g., pain and suffering), unfairness (e.g., not reciprocating altruism), disloyalty (e.g., not being allegiant to the group), disobedience (e.g., not following leaders or authority), and impurity (e.g., not living in a pure or elevated way; being contaminated or evoking disgust). Each moral concern is a direct or indirect harm to the individual or the groups upon which individuals depend to protect them.

Emerging research in moral psychology demonstrates that concerns about harm (i.e., victimization) underlie all moral judgements (Schein & Gray, 2018). For example, while

some research has pointed to the importance of disgust in moral opposition (Scott et al., 2016), re-analyses of this data suggest perceptions of harm account for 30 times more variance in these moral judgments than disgust (Gray & Schein, 2016). Others have found that the moral condemnation of acts that violate different values (i.e., "foundations") hinges upon people's perception of those acts as causing harm or victimization (Ochoa, 2022). The more people see an act as causing victimization, the more people condemn it (Schein & Gray, 2015).

All evolutionary theories acknowledge that morality generally evolved to reduce harm within social groups. Of course, as mentioned above, there are times where harm is seen as permissible or *normative*, allowed based on the rules of society. The importance of norms is crucial for understanding the psychology of morality (e.g., Brennan et al., 2013), because it is not just the existence of mere harm that seems immoral, but instead some form of counter-normative harm, which seems to be at the core of victimization. A victim is someone harmed without good reason, justification, or precedent. People often view the harm of capital punishment as morally acceptable, with 64% of adults in the United States supporting the death penalty for people convicted of murder (Pew Research Center, 2021). Advocates of capital punishment may agree that executions cause harm, but a murderer does not seem like a "victim," because they perceive executions as normative, and done for a good reason.

1.4 Victimhood Still Looms Large in People's Minds

Morality has been successful in helping us avoid harm and reduce interpersonal victimization. Evidence shows that we are safer than ever, with humans today experiencing relatively little violence (Pinker, 2011). But while we live in a much safer society than our ancestors (Breithaupt et al., 2004), we are still fixed on the idea of victimhood because our understandings of victimhood have expanded through *concept creep.*

Concept creep is a psychological phenomenon where ideas related to victimization (e.g., bullying, abuse, trauma) have expanded their meanings over time, and now encompass a much broader range of phenomena (Haslam, 2016). Concept creep occurs vertically and horizontally. Vertical concept creep is where a concepts' definition becomes less stringent (e.g., bullying is no longer being mean to someone at school, but can also occur in the workplace with adults), and horizontal concept creep is when a whole new class of phenomena is now categorized as part of the concept (e.g., bullying is no longer just physical violence or name calling but can also be the silent treatment).

Concept creep is driven by a reduced prevalence of obvious threats (Levari et al., 2018). Our world is becoming safer (Pinker, 2011), but our minds remain motivated to detect threats and immorality, driving objectively less damaging acts (e.g., less blatant bullying) to seem more victimizing and more immoral. Haslam (2016) argues that while concept creep can be well-intentioned (e.g., by helping us avoid smaller and smaller forms of victimhood), it can also lead us to pathologizing common (but unpleasant) human experiences. What initially might seem like something uncomfortable might then seem like an act of victimization.

Expanded perceptions of victimization can be positive as it alerts people to the need for social change, such as when the #MeToo movement highlighted the number of ways that women suffer sexual harassment (Savigny, 2020). But the concept creep of victimization can also lead to political polarization when people see victimization in ambiguous acts, like liberals seeing harm in wishing people "Merry Christmas" and conservatives seeing harm in NFL players kneeling for the national anthem (Haslam et al., 2020; Haslam, 2016).

Concept creep highlights how victimhood is often more a matter of perception. There are acts that seem objectively damaging, but whether we classify these acts as creating true victims—those who unjustly suffer at the hands of another person—is a matter of perception.

Different people with different political leanings can both feel like they are acting to protect victims, even when they are supporting completely opposite sides of the conflict. Part of why victimhood is slippery is that it can be defined in different ways.

2. What is Victimhood? Defining a Slippery Concept

At the extreme, questions of victimhood are obvious. If a little girl is repeatedly beaten by her hard-drinking mean-spirited grandfather, she is obviously a victim. But other cases of victimhood are more ambiguous because there are at least three different lay understandings of victimhood: 1) individual victims, 2) group-based victims, and 3) moral victims. These understandings can compete, mudding the waters of who is "truly" a victim.

2.1 The Individual Victim: Can Someone be Harmed?

Someone who is victimized is an individual who can be harmed (i.e., experience pain and suffering). This sense of victimhood comes first in our survey of lay definitions because it is grounded in the long-standing notion of individuals, which can be traced back to the Enlightenment (e.g., Lukes, 1971). The Enlightenment saw humans as individuals primarily by virtue of their minds, and consistent with this idea, people generally think that entities with minds can be individual victims whereas entities without minds cannot be (e.g., Gray et al., 2007; Waytz et al., 2010). If you strike a rock with a hammer, it is unlikely anyone would suggest the rock was victimized. However, if you strike a small child with a hammer, people would be incensed believing that the child was victimized. Children, unlike rocks, have minds. It is the capacity to suffer pain that makes an individual seem like a victim (Schein & Gray, 2018). If someone is weeping and sobbing after being hit, we are more likely to feel like they have been victimized.

The importance of the capacity for suffering is clear when considering campaigns for moral rights. Affording others moral rights acknowledges that someone or something can be victimized and therefore needs to be protected from harm. When English philosopher Jeremy

Bentham considered whether animals deserved moral rights, he argued that "The question is not, can they reason? Nor can they talk? But can they suffer?" (Bentham, 1879). Similarly, when the famous first Nations Chief Standing Bear argued in court why Native Americans deserved protection he argued "My hand is not the color of yours, but if I pierce it, I shall feel pain" (Dando-Collins, 2004). He was arguing that his fellow Native Americans can be individual victims because they can experience harm.

The problem with the capacity to feel is that it is ultimately hidden from other people; others are unable to know the true amount of suffering you have faced. Imagine you start crying after tripping, some may believe you are truly hurt, but others may think you are exaggerating. Philosophers have articulated the inaccessibility of other people's thoughts and feelings as the "problem of other minds" (e.g., Leudar & Costall, 2004; Sober, 2000).

Differences in the acknowledgment of others' suffering occur frequently in our daily lives (e.g., believing your friend who is complaining, is suffering less than you) and in large territorial and cultural conflicts (e.g., the suffering experienced by Palestinians and Israelis). Perceiving less pain in small interpersonal contexts may lead to expressing less sympathy (Riess, 2017), but in larger, more fraught conflicts, this denial of pain can connect to political animosity, dehumanization, and endorsement of violence (e.g., Haslam & Loughman, 2014; Kozak et al., 2006; Hameiri et al., 2023). In war, enemies often suggest that the other side cannot feel pain and suffering and are actually less than human (e.g., "savage monsters"; National Archives, 2019) than their own side, and therefore cannot truly be victimized.

Our understanding of others' minds is mostly a matter of perception. Our work has studied the nature of *mind perception,* and we find it plays a key role in moral judgments (e.g., Gray et al., 2011; Ward et al., 2013). In one study (Gray et al., 2007), participants evaluated the mental capabilities of a diverse set of targets (e.g., adults, animals, God) and their moral standing (i.e., whether the target deserved moral rights, and whether the target

was morally responsible for harming someone). Results found that when people perceived

entities as being able to feel (e.g., capable of feeling pain, or emotions; like babies or adults),

people afforded them more moral rights (i.e., protection from harm). On the other hand, when

people believed targets were able to think (e.g., capable of remembering, planning, knowing

right from wrong; like adults or God), participants believed they were more morally

responsible for their actions.

This work highlights that perceptions of mind proceed along the two dimensions (see

Figure 1) of experience (feeling) and agency (thinking). Importantly, perceiving individuals

as capable of feeling makes them seem vulnerable to victimhood. Those who can suffer pain

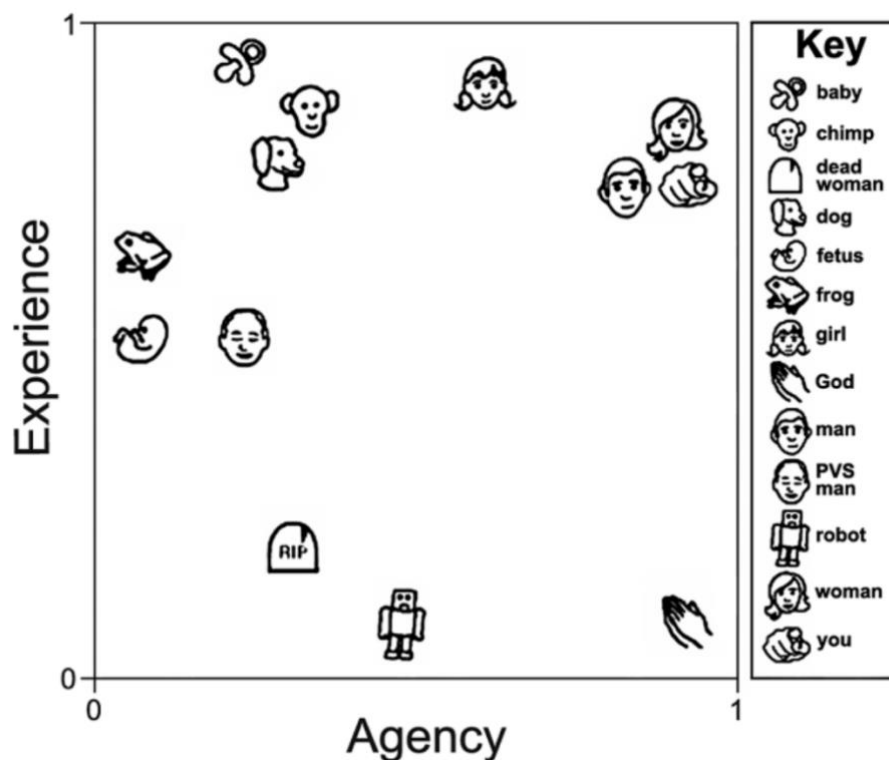are "vulnerable feelers." (Wegner & Gray, 2016).

Figure 1. Dimensions of mind perception from Gray et al. (2007), with permission. PVS

stands for persistent vegetative state.

Perceptions of who counts as an individual victim vary by person and by situation. For

example, people with higher levels of psychopathy see others as less capable of feeling pain

(Gray et al., 2011), which explains their increased willingness to victimize them (Hare, 1999). In contrast, people can ascribe others more capacity to feel when witnessing them being victimized. When people see intentional harm inflicted on vegetative patients, robots, and the dead, people are more likely to believe these targets experience pain and suffering (Ward et al., 2013). The slipperiness of mind perception can help explain disagreements about victimhood and so can questions of group identity.

2.2 The Group-Based Victim: Are people in some groups more likely to be harmed?

Suffering harm may ultimately be an individual experience, but not all people are equally likely to be victimized. Even those who hold tightly to Enlightenment ideals about the primacy of the individual agree that people can be impacted by the groups to which they belong, whether those groups are defined by age, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, sexuality, religion, or politics. These groups define our identity (Hogg, 2016), and can shape the likelihood that we are victimized by others.

One obvious group of potential victims is children who are smaller and weaker and therefore more vulnerable to harm. This vulnerability to victimhood is why children have many special protections in society. For example, child protective services can take kids away from their parents and place them in foster care in cases of abuse. This increased vulnerability to suffering makes people especially concerned about their wellbeing (Govrin, 2014), and makes people see crimes against children as especially abhorrent (Soule, 2023). Although children are likely the most easily harmed, other groups are statistical victims, like the elderly (Friedman et al., 2017), who can be abused by disgruntled relatives or callous institutions.

More generally, "statistical" or "group-based" victims are likely to be people belonging to groups that have relatively less influence or power in society, including racial and sexual minority groups. Evidence shows that members of the LGBTQ community are nearly four times more likely to be victims of a violent crime than non-LGBTQ individuals

(Williams Institute, 2020) and Black men are 2.5 times more likely to by killed by police than White men (Edwards et al., 2019).

Another group of statistical victims is women. While they are not a numerical minority, women are on average smaller and physically weaker than men, making them susceptible to abuse. Ninety percent of rape victims are women (Rainn, n.d.). Of course, some women are stronger than some men, but the entire point of statistical group-based victimhood lies with statistical group-based differences.

Individual victimhood revolves around whether a person could theoretically be victimized. This is an absolute question of victimhood (i.e., can this person be a victim or not?). In contrast, questions of statistical victimhood revolve around whether someone with these characteristics is more likely to be victimized. In other words, statistical victims are always *relative* (i.e., who is more likely to be a victim?). It is true that a wealthy White person from the suburbs is equally capable of suffering as a poor Black person from the inner city—both have minds that can experience pain (the individual victim). But White people are statistically less likely to be victimized than Black people (group-based victimhood).

Moral debates in society frequently arise when different sides focus on different understandings of victimhood: one side focuses on absolute questions of individual victimhood while the other side focuses on statistical questions of group-based victimhood. Consider disagreements between Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter. All Lives Matter focuses more on individual victimhood, by arguing that everyone can suffer and by emphasizing the stories of White people who experience harm, especially police officers who risk their lives everyday (e.g., Capatides, 2020; Lussenhop, 2015). On the other hand, Black Lives Matter highlights statistical victimhood, highlighting how the Black community is statistically more likely to face victimization, especially at the hands of the police (Edwards et al., 2019).

The connection between individual and group-based victimhood can be unclear because peoples' identities are varied and complex, making it (in some cases) challenging to determine who is part of a disadvantaged or marginalized group. For example, research has found that Black people view Black victims of racial discrimination who are wealthy (as compared to not wealthy) as less racially identified, leading to less empathy for these victims (Johnson & Kaiser, 2012). Thus, having identities both with marginalized (i.e., Black Americans) and non-marginalized (i.e., the wealthy) populations can complicate perceptions of victimhood.

2.3 The Moral Victim: Is someone else to blame for their suffering?

Even though people debate about absolute versus relative victimhood, moral and political arguments often center on the third lay definition: who is a *moral* victim? When discussing victimhood, people may mention who can suffer harm, and which groups are more likely to be harmed, but often they focus on something more specific, whether someone has been unjustly harmed at the hands of another person. Consider the difference between someone who crashes their car into a tree and breaks their legs versus someone who is kidnapped by a violent criminal who then breaks their legs. Both are individual victims, but only the second seems like a moral victim, because we can blame someone else (and not them) for their suffering.

The idea of a "moral victim" is important because it distinguishes the concept of mere suffering from the kind of victimhood at the center of morality. Moral victims are the other side of the moral coin to perpetrators; they are the complement to abusers, assaulters, rapists, thieves, embezzlers, and murderers. Perpetrators are the "moral agents" who do evil acts; moral victims are the "moral patients" who receive those evil acts (Schein & Gray, 2018). A crucial attribute of moral victims is *innocence*—people who are morally victimized are blameless in their suffering and are seen as undeserving of guilt (Malle et al., 2014). People

are innocent moral victims when we can point to a blameworthy perpetrator to hold responsible for their suffering.

When people make sense of moral victims, they will likely consider ideas of both individual and group-based victimhood. If someone can suffer, that makes them capable of being a moral victim, and if someone belongs to a group likely to be victimized (e.g., children), then it also makes it more likely that we will see them as moral victims. But even someone who can legitimately suffer and who belongs to a disadvantaged group can be denied moral victimhood when others see them as responsible or blameworthy for their own suffering. For example, some people view members of economically disadvantaged groups not as victims of income inequality but as foolish decision-makers, a belief that reduces support for income retribution (Dorey, 2010; Payne, 2018; Sainz et al., 2020). You are a moral victim if someone else is to blame for your plight (Schein & Gray, 2018), but if you are responsible for your own suffering, then you are no longer a moral victim (Gray & Wegner, 2011a).

2.4 Victim Blaming

The ambiguity of moral victimhood facilitates "blaming the victim," where people acknowledge that someone suffered, but fail to see them as a moral victim. A classic example of victim blaming is when people blame survivors of sexual assault for the attack based on the victim's occupation (Sprankle et al., 2018), clothing (Zelin et al., 2019), alcohol consumption (Grubb & Turner, 2012), and whether they fought back (Randall, 2010). Victim blaming depends on both the victim and the person blaming, with men being more likely to victim blame than women (Davies et al., 2009), and people with more sexist beliefs more likely to blame women for being assaulted (Valor-Segura et al., 2011). For a review of characteristics that predict victim blaming, see van der Bruggen and Grubb (2014).

Stereotypes can also drive victim blaming. For example, men are viewed as strong and tough and therefore are frequently blamed when sexually assaulted (Burt & DeMello, 2002). Victim blaming also occurs when acknowledgements of victimhood induce discomfort, such as when we blame victims of prejudice and discrimination to maintain the comforting belief that society is fair and just (Fohring, 2018). The extent to which someone believes in a just world (Lerner 1980) varies across people (Bartholomaeus & Strelan, 2019), but the more someone believes in a just world, the more likely they are to victim blame (Valor-Segura et al., 2011).

Our own research has found these feelings of discomfort and dissonance can drive victim blaming. In one study (Gray & Wegner, 2010a), people listened to a person down the hall being "tortured." Participants were told this person may have cheated on a task and was being punished with an ice bath, in the hopes that they might confess to wrongdoing. Participants listened over a speaker and heard the "torture victim" either whimpering in discomfort (pain condition) or showing little discomfort (no pain condition). The more the victim suffered, the more people saw them as guilty of cheating. People felt uncomfortable at the suffering of an innocent person right next to them and so they decided that the person must not be innocent (i.e., they must have cheated). Importantly, when people do *not* feel personal discomfort at the suffering of others, they often link more pain to more moral victimhood, consistent with the link between suffering and victimhood and with the phenomenon of moral typecasting, which we cover later.

Overall, questions of moral victimhood may be the most ambiguous because they involve not only whether a person can suffer, and whether someone is likely to suffer, but also whether they are innocent or deserving of their suffering.

2.5 One Big Problem: Agreeing on a Definition of Victimhood

While scholars have attempted to define victimhood (e.g., suggesting it is based on unfair or undeserved suffering from an identifiable cause; Bayley, 1991)), questions of victimhood are murky because people rely on different understandings of this concept. Sometimes people emphasize individual victims, sometimes group-based victims, and sometimes moral victims. But when it comes to moral judgments, moral victims are the most important.

3. Judgments of Others' Victimhood

Conversations about politics and morality revolve around victimhood and harm (Schein & Gray, 2018) because our moral minds are deeply focused on victims. Here, we explore how we make sense of the victimhood of other people.

3.1 The Nature of Moral Judgment

The human capacity for morality revolves around victims. Morality evolved to prevent harms in society (e.g., Baumard, 2016; Carnes & Janoff-Bulman, 2012; Schein & Gray, 2018), but although most moral psychologists agree that concerns about victimization are the ultimate driver of our moral sense (Brewer & Hayes, 2011; Kubin et al., 2021; Schein & Gray, 2015), some argue that concerns about victimhood are irrelevant to many moral judgments, especially "harmless wrongs" like consensual incest (Haidt & Hersch, 2001). Of course, people condemn acts that are obviously harmful and centered on victimhood, like murder (Schein & Gray, 2015), but some psychologists believe that the moral mind is divided into little modules or "switches in the brain" (Haidt, 2012), and that only one of these switches is sensitive to harm-based concerns. The other switches are argued to be sensitive to values like loyalty, authority, or purity but *not* harm. This idea has since evolved into MFT (Graham et al., 2013).

This theory is popular because it gives language to frequent moral disagreements between liberals and conservatives. However, this divided understanding of the moral mind is

inconsistent with classic evidence from cognitive psychology and modern evidence from neuroscience. Our brains are not divided into little modules but instead use integrated networks to understand and process the world (Barrett & Satpute, 2013). These networks make sense of all concepts in a similar way, whether those concepts are "romance", "cats", "African Americans", or "morality."

Our brain reveals no functional differentiation or specialization between different concepts of similar emotional or social weight, let alone within varieties of concepts. Of course, unless you are a dualist, you must acknowledge that every different idea must have some differential activation in our brain. If we can refer to it with different words, then there must be some neural differences. In-line with this idea, some in neuroscience have argued there are "grandmother cells", which are hypothetical neurons that respond to very specific stimuli (e.g., grandmothers; Barlow, 2009), though this concept is largely contested (e.g., see discussion in Barwich, 2019). But even if some neural specificity can exist, there is no evidence that these specific processes map onto functional evolutionary networks. Also, the idea of neural differences between stimuli overlooks the clear similarity across moral judgments. One recent study reveals that patterns of neural activation during moral judgments are most similar to patterns of neural activation when people make judgments of harm (Chester et al., 2024). That is, when people are wondering how immoral an act is, they ask themselves how much someone has been victimized.

At its heart, a moral judgment is a categorization decision: how much is X act part of the category of "immorality." Decades of work in cognitive psychology (Murphy, 2004) shows that our minds make these categorization decisions by comparing instances (e.g., acts) to templates or schemas: How similar is X to the template? These conceptual templates combine the most essential elements of a category into a Gestalt understanding of that category (Trujillo & Holler, 2023) and then guide what we think about when we are asked to

imagine an example of that category (Smith & Medin, 2002). For the concept of romance, this template might look like a moonlit dinner surrounded by rose petals, for cats this template might look like a standard shorthaired tabby. People's cognitive template of "African Americans"—which is also called a "stereotype"— involves Afrocentric physical features like textured hair, dark brown skin, and a wide nose bridge (Blair & Judd, 2011). The more an example matches the template, the stronger it is seen to belong to that category. So, people with more Afrocentric physical features are seen as "more Black," and acts that better fit the template of immorality are seen as "more immoral."

What is our cognitive template of immorality? We can determine this in two ways. First, what examples of immorality are most accessible? When people are asked to freely recall an act that is morally wrong, they recall obviously harmful acts with a clear victim, like murder or stealing (Schein & Gray, 2015). Moreover, when asked to rate these acts on different values, participants overwhelmingly rate these acts as harmful, which highlights that peoples' templates of immoral acts are focused on questions of harm and victimization (Schein & Gray, 2015).

The content of our psychological templates is also revealed by our reaction times. When people are asked to make quick judgments about how much an example counts as a member of a category, those judgments are faster when they better match that template. For example, people are quicker to say that a "robin" is a bird than an "ostrich" is a bird (Rosch & Lloyd, 1978). If our cognitive template of morality revolves around victimhood, people should be quickest to say that obviously victimizing acts (vs. ambiguously victimizing acts) are immoral. We tested this idea in one study, where we asked people to make moral judgments, as quickly as possible, of many different acts (Schein & Gray, 2015). As predicted by a victim-centric moral schema, people rated the immorality of obviously victimizing acts like murder, rape, and pedophilia the most quickly. In fact, the reaction times

of rating harm and immorality were very similar—with harm a bit faster—exactly what you

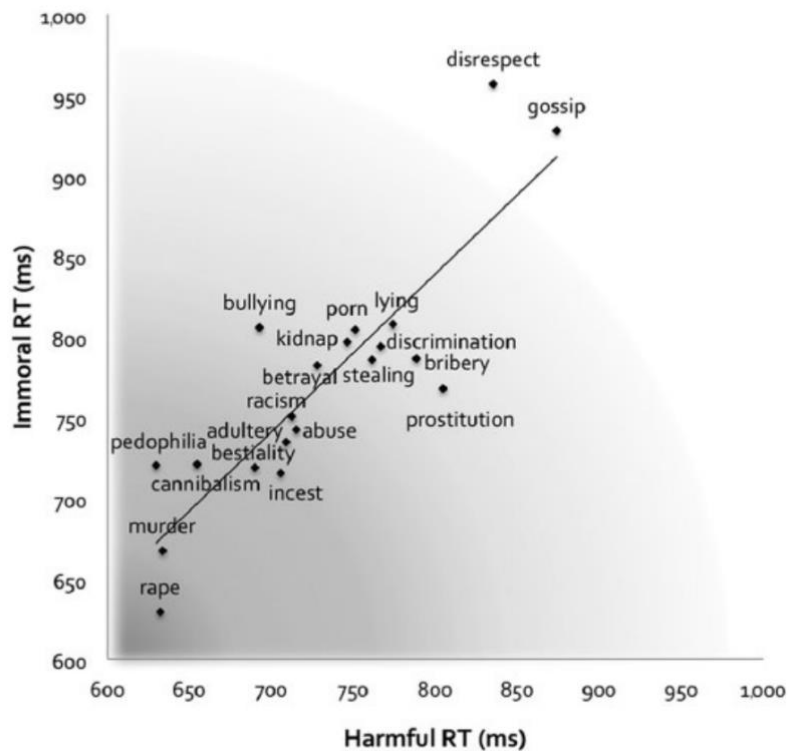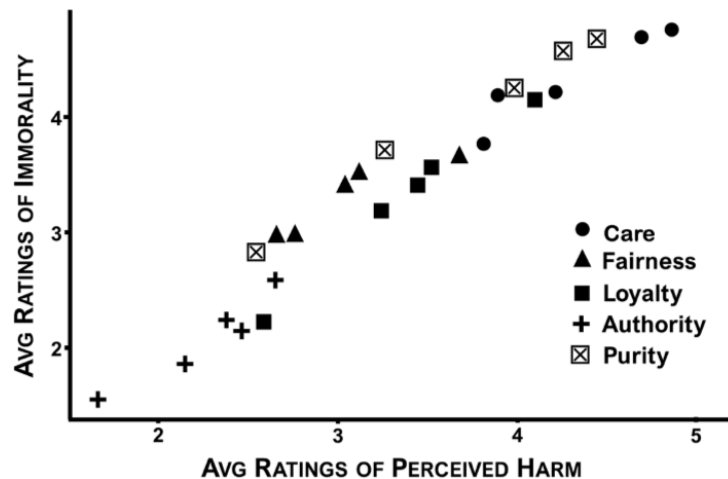would expect if questions of harm feed into moral judgment (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Average reaction time for assessing the immorality and harmfulness of an act.

Taken from Schein & Gray (2015) with permission.

A more recent set of studies directly and elegantly reveal evidence for a harm- or

victim-based cognitive moral template (Ochoa, 2022). In the first study, participants rated the

immorality of different vignettes drawn from the categories of MFT (i.e., care, fairness,

loyalty, authority, and purity; Graham et al., 2013). Even though these vignettes had

qualitatively different acts, ranging from cruelty to animals to disrespecting authority figures,

people's moral judgments of these acts were extremely well predicted by how much these

acts were perceived to involve harm to a victim, just as a victim-based template predicts. No

matter what kind of behavior, action, or value a scenario focused on, people judged it as

wrong based on how much these acts were understood to victimize another person (see

Figure 3).

Figure 3. Ratings of perceived harm and immorality of actions that violate all moral foundations. As acts seem more harmful, they seem more immoral, regardless of what "foundation" the acts are drawn from. (Data and original figure from Ochoa, 2022; formatting adapted from Gray et al., 2022).

In a second study, Ochoa (2022) found that reaction times for rating acts as immoral was very well predicted by the amount of harm or victimization present. Acts that were obviously victimizing were quickly judged as immoral (as in Schein & Gray 2015), and acts that were obviously *not* victimizing were quickly judged as *not* immoral (i.e., acts that clearly did not match the template were easy to see as not members of the category). As an analogy, people are fast to say that robins are birds and fast to say that cats are not birds. Interestingly, in the middle range where acts are ambiguously victimizing, like prostitution, people are slower in making moral judgments. Returning to the bird analogy, people are slower to rate whether penguins or flying fish are birds because they are more ambiguous members of that category. This again is consistent with the idea of a victim- or harm-based template.

A neuroscience study also provides support for the centrality of harm in moral judgment (Chester et al., 2024). On each trial, participants were presented with one of twenty-five scenarios, drawn from across the five "foundations" and made a single judgment. This judgment was either based on the immorality of the act, or its harmfulness, grossness

(disgust), weirdness, unpleasantness, or intentionality of the act. All judgments were made multiple times on all scenarios. Representational similarity analyses compared the neural similarity between the judgments, allowing for the possibility to see which kinds of judgments were most like moral judgments at the level of brain activity. As predicted, moral judgments were most similar to harm judgments, with the other four judgment types being consistently less similar (Chester et al., 2024). These results reveal that moral judgments revolve most around questions of harm (i.e., victimhood).

Both our own research and that of others suggests people use a template revolving around victimization to understand whether acts are immoral. These results stand in contrast to some modern moral psychologists who argue against the central power of victimhood in moral judgment (Graham et al., 2013). This anti-victim stance is driven by two ideas. The first is that people seem to condemn "harmless wrongs" like the classic story of consensual incest between "Mark and Julie," where a brother and a sister have sex, but both enjoy it with no bad consequences (Haidt & Hersch, 2001). That people condemn these acts despite obvious objective harm seems to require some moral consideration beyond harm.

The second idea prompting researchers to reject the sweeping importance of victimhood in moral cognition is cultural pluralism. Classic work finds that different cultures emphasize different values in conversations about morality (Shweder et al., 1990; Shweder et al., 2013). For example, Brahmin Indians are more likely than secular Americans to discuss ideals of divinity and community, and conservatives are more likely than liberals to talk about chastity. These pluralistic values seem disconnected from the concerns about direct physical violence that sit at the center of a harm-based template.

But closer inspection reveals that neither "harmless wrongs" nor cultural pluralism disprove the overarching importance of victimhood. Advocates of MFT fail to understand the true nature of victims. Concerns about victimization are not confined to one little switch in

the brain that focuses on obvious physical or emotional harm. Although obvious forms of victimhood like abuse and murder sit at the center of a harm-based template, studies reveal that people's concerns about victimhood extend more broadly to all moral acts including those condemned only by some cultures. When people are wondering about the immorality of an instance of disrespect or laziness or promiscuity or consensual incest, they implicitly consider whether someone is victimized. We now explore—and correct—the misconceptions about harm- and victim-based moral cognition.

3.2 The Nature of Victimhood in Moral Judgments

Victimhood is obviously important to morality. Our moral sense evolved to protect us and our societies from becoming victims, and moral psychologists agree that many moral judgments are directly focused on preventing the victimization of the vulnerable, including condemnations of theft, assault, and murder. Almost all Western law seems to focus on protecting society and its people from harm. But we go further than these observations to suggest that all moral cognition focuses on considerations of harm and victimhood.

We already reviewed evidence for the existence of a victim- or harm-based cognitive template above and found that all acts (at least from the 5 "foundations") are judged as wrong based on their amount of harmfulness (Ochoa, 2022). But to really appreciate how all of morality revolves around harm, we need to appreciate the true nature of this crucial concept. We need to appreciate five key facts about the psychological concept of victimhood—what you might tongue-in-cheek call the five foundations of victimhood.

Perceived: Victimhood is more perceived than objective

Intuitive: Victimhood is more intuitive than reasoned

Continuum: Victimhood is more of a continuum than binary

Combination: Victimhood combines with other basic concepts

Norms: Victimhood is understood in tandem with norms

Although we use the word "victimization" here to be consistent with the focus of this chapter, in the past we focused on "harm" (Schein & Gray, 2018). Both terms are tightly linked, as questions of victimhood are integral to harm, which canonically involves someone intentionally victimizing a vulnerable other. Once we understand the true nature of harm, we will see that the "victimless" wrong of Mark and Julie is not actually so harmless, which means that we do not need to invent a set of non-harm "foundations" to make sense of moral judgment. Instead, we can understand moral judgments as revolving around how much people see an act as intuitively harmful.

While it may seem controversial to claim that harm is a matter of perception (in the eye of the beholder), an intuition (something quickly and viscerally felt), and a continuum (ranging from low to high), we argue that it is no more contentious than claiming that morality possesses these features—and people widely agree that morality is a perceived intuitive continuum. We are simply claiming that harm and morality share similar features because of their deep connection. Importantly, we are not merely claiming that the "moral foundation" of harm/care is the most important foundation among foundations. We fundamentally deny the existence of separate cognitive moral foundations and suggest that our moral mind makes judgments by applying a harm-based template to all potentially immoral acts. The idea of victims is integral to a harm-based template.

3.2.1 Victims are Perceived

The categories of the human mind often seem objective. When we look at someone who is strikingly beautiful, it feels like that person is objectively beautiful. When we eat something that tastes terrible, it feels like that food is objectively gross. But judgments of beauty and taste are matters of perception, varying across people and cultures. Fermented shark meat might seem disgusting, but the dish of "Hákarl" is a delicacy in Iceland.

Morality can also seem objective. For example, it might seem obvious to many people that taking children from their parents is immoral, but from 1910 into the 1970s, many people in Australia thought it was a moral good to forcibly remove aboriginal children from their parents and educate them in government institutions (Allam & Collard, 2023). Many other examples reveal that views of morality change based on the context and culture. Questions of harm can seem just as objective as morality, but it too is a matter of perception.

Evidence for harm being a matter of perception can be found in current conflicts between liberals and conservatives, who have different perceptions about who might be victimized (Schein & Gray, 2015). Consider the abortion debate, pro-life proponents are concerned over the harm to the fetus if aborted, while pro-choice proponents are concerned over the harm to women forced to have a child they do not want. Both sides care about victimhood, but they focus on different victims.

One way that perceptions of victimhood can vary is by seeing different amounts of mind in entities. For example, people who have recently eaten beef are less likely to view cows as capable of suffering (Loughnan et al., 2010), and those who support elective abortions are less likely to view the pre-born as capable of experiencing pain (Bilewicz et al., 2017). Likewise, those who see flag burning as immoral are more likely to see the flag as alive and worthy of moral protection (DeScioli, 2008). The idea of victimizing the flag is consistent with the United States Flag Code, which explicitly states that "The flag represents a living country and is itself considered a living thing" (Federal Flag Code, 1976).

Another way that people perceive harm is through the "logic of universalization," seeing relatively victimless acts causing widespread harm if everyone committed similar acts (Levine et al., 2020). Catching a few extra fish might seem harmless, but if everyone did it, then the population of fisheries could collapse (e.g., Roughgarden & Smith, 1996). People also appreciate that acts can generally create victims even if they might not in all

circumstances (i.e., potential victimhood). Driving home drunk may not harm someone every time, but most people still consider it harmful because of its potential to harm innocent victims (Steinbock, 1985). Condemnation of acts like drunk driving connect back to the idea of statistical victims, where people appreciate that victimhood can be probabilistic. Importantly, these perceptions of victimization are not simply post-hoc rationalizations.

3.2.2 Victimhood is Intuitive

When people make judgments of whether an act victimizes someone, they do not ponder the idea for minutes. Instead, perceptions of victimhood occur automatically, within milliseconds. One neuroscience study finds that the recognition of harm occurs in approximately 122 milliseconds in the amygdala/temporal pole and 182 milliseconds in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (Decety & Cacioppo, 2012). This quick neural processing explains why people quickly rate acts as victimizing (Schein & Gray, 2015).

The intuitive nature of victimhood should be no surprise because morality is also intuitive. Even if people can reason about morality (Richardson, 2018), most moral judgments arise quickly and without careful consideration (Haidt, 2011). Likewise, even if people can reason about victimization, most perceptions of victimization are rapid and automatic. Remember that victimhood is the key element in the categorization of acts as immoral, and ample research shows that categorization judgments are intuitive. When people judge whether something is a bird, they do not reason about all the elements of a bird but make a quick judgment. When people wonder how much someone belongs to one race or another, they seldom agonize over the features of that race, but instead they rely upon their cognitive template of that race (i.e., stereotypes; Tobena et al., 1999) to make a quick judgment.

Evidence suggests that our mind's harm-based template works intuitively. In one study, we asked people to what extent various "impure and objectively victimless" acts

victimized someone. These acts included masturbating to a picture of one's dead sister or watching animals have sex to become sexually aroused (Gray et al., 2014). In one condition, people had ample time to answer this question, allowing them the possibility to rationalize their answers and justify them with reason. But in the other condition, people were placed under time pressure, preventing them from reasoning. If perceptions of victimization were post-hoc rationalizations, participants should see less victimhood under time pressure, but under time pressure people saw *more* victimization in "harmless" acts. These results suggest that explicit reasoning serves to dampen intuitive perceptions of victimhood, not invent them.

One reason that perceptions of victimization are intuitive is that they are tied to affect—feelings of good and bad that are the building blocks of emotion (Barrett, 2006). When we perceive others who suffer, we feel negative affect (Reid-Quiñones et al., 2011), and these feelings both occur quickly and connect with moral judgments (Epstein, 2011; Gray et al., 2022). In a recent paper, we discovered that perceptions of victimhood and feelings of negative affect are highly correlated, and again found that perceptions of victimhood robustly drive moral judgments even for so-called victimless wrongs, even when controlling for negative affect (Gray et al., 2022).

The idea of affect and morality inevitably brings up the idea of empathy (or sympathy; Gray & Wegner, 2011b), which people often feel when confronted with victims (e.g., Zaki, 2018). We cover empathy in more detail soon, but it is worth noting here that acts of victimization seem to robustly create powerful feelings, but this may not always translate into empathy. People may translate their affect into moral outrage at the perpetrator of victimization. This is a process distinct from empathy felt for victims (Hechler & Kessler, 2018) and may lead people to focus on punishing perpetrators rather than helping victims. Other times, people may engage in victim blaming to avoid feeling empathy (e.g., Johnson et

al., 2023) especially because empathy can be practically and cognitively costly (Cameron et al., 2019).

The association between harm and affect is apparent in the real world. Consider the example from Australia mentioned above: separating aboriginal children from their parents. You likely viscerally feel that action victimizes children. Likewise, when you think about Mark and Julie having sex, it can be hard to shake the visceral feeling that they are causing harm, even if an experimenter argues that nothing bad will happen (Haidt & Hersch, 2001). In the words of one philosopher (Gendler, 2008), perceptions of victimhood are less of a "belief" and more of an "alief," an affectively grounded belief about the world. Examples of aliefs include the feeling that tarantulas are harmful even if you explicitly know they are not.

The intuitive nature of perceived victimhood and its affective punch can also explain results in moral psychology connecting disgust to moral condemnation (Schnall et al., 2008). Many have argued that disgust alone can drive many moral judgments (for a review of this literature, see Inbar & Pizzaro, 2022), but this seems unlikely. First, a meta-analysis argues that there is no direct effect of inducing disgust on increasing moral condemnation (Landy & Goodwin, 2015). Making people feel more disgusted, like with the smell of farts, does not lead them to make harsher moral judgments. Some thoughtful logic also makes it obvious that disgust is not a sufficient driver of immorality: there are many things that are disgusting but not immoral, like cleaning up a dirty diaper. Someone being covered in baby feces is gross, but no one thinks they are a moral monster. Data from our lab finds that disgust leads to moral judgments via perceptions of victimization (Schein et al., 2016). The negative feelings of disgust predispose us to infer the presence of victimization through the process of "affect as information" (Clore et al., 2001), and this drives moral condemnation (Gray et al., 2022). In other words, bad feelings nudge people to see harm in ambiguously harmful acts, but do not themselves drive moral judgment.

3.2.3 Victimhood is a Continuum

Misunderstanding perceptions of victimization as reasoned calculations instead of intuitive perceptions is one reason that the field has misunderstood moral judgment. Another reason is that people wrongly assume that victimhood is either present or absent. When it comes to making sense of the world, distinct categories can make for alluring lay-theories, like arguing that each person has a specific "love language" (Chapman, 2009). Human minds especially like simplifying the world by creating dichotomies. This explains why moral psychologists may oversimplify understandings of morality, collapsing a continuum of victimization into a dichotomy. However, victimization exists along a continuum from "none at all" to "slight" to "moderate" to "a lot" to "extreme."

All psychological concepts are relative and occur along a continuum from less to more, including implicit bias (Hannay & Payne, 2022), inclusion of self in other (Aron et al., 1992), affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012), romantic attraction (Rubin, 1970), level of regret (Brehaut et al., 2003), dominance (Pratto et al., 1994), extraversion (Ashton & Lee, 2009), and essentialism (Yaylacı et al., 2021). While we may say that someone is "extraverted" or "biased" what we really mean is that they are *more* extraverted or biased than someone else.

Moral judgments also lie along a continuum, as people appreciate how some acts are more severe than others. Murder is worse than fraud, which is worse than littering. This continuum is reflected in the law, which can be thought of as the societal formalization of our moral intuitions. We hand out very different sentences for different criminal acts even if all these acts are technically illegal. Treason and smoking in a restaurant might both be against the law, but judges only consider life in prison for the former.

One reason why moral judgments exist along the continuum is that perceptions of victimhood exist along a continuum. Some acts inconvenience someone, like cutting in front

of them in line, but some acts cause lasting harm, like cutting off their feet with a dirty hatchet. Because of these differences in perceived victimization, we see involuntary hatchet amputation as more immoral than line cutting. Part of the continuum of victimization hinges on the vulnerability of the recipient of the harm. Slapping an off-duty Navy seal might sting their cheek, but we perceive it as causing less victimization than slapping a newborn baby (Gray & Wegner, 2009). Accordingly, it seems more morally wrong to slap a newborn baby.

We see the continuum of victimization in our own work, where people distinguish between degrees of harmfulness (e.g., Schein & Gray, 2015; Gray & Wegner, 2009). Consider the study where people were asked to judge the amount of victimhood in "harmless" acts either under time pressure or not (Gray et al., 2014). When they had ample time, people saw acts like watching animals have sex to become aroused as about a 2 out of 5 in victimizing, and this number went to 3 out of 5 under time pressure. People did not view this act as harmful as murder (5/5), but neither was it seen as harmless as taking the bus (0/5).

That victimhood is perceived along a continuum should make us doubt whenever someone calls an act "victimless"—the question is always "compared to what?" If you want to understand *how much* someone views something as immoral, you should understand *how much* they view something as victimizing someone.

3.2.4 Combination: Victimhood is a Combination of Other Basic Concepts

Victimhood is powerfully connected to moral judgments—it is the most central element of our harm-based cognitive schema. At its heart, this harm-based schema has three elements: 1) an intentional agent 2) causing damage to 3) a vulnerable patient (i.e., a victim). This can be denoted as: $iA \xrightarrow{d} vP$ (see Figure 4). Another way to think about the combination of these elements is the "moral dyad" (Schein & Gray, 2018), where "an intentional agent victimizes a vulnerable entity" forming the middle of our moral template. The more an act involves someone intending to victimize, a harmful action, and a vulnerable victim, the more

it matches this cognitive template, and so the more people morally condemn it. The dyad explains why double parking seems like a poorer fit for our category of immorality (i.e., it is less "immoral") than intentional child abuse, because in child abuse all three of the elements of the moral dyad are more obvious. Because acts vary along a continuum of how much people view them as matching these three elements—and therefore the moral dyad—this gives us a continuum of moral judgment.

One way to think about the cognitive template of morality is as a fuzzy circle, as in Figure 4. In the middle of this circle are acts that are "central" to our moral template, acts that seem obviously victimizing and are therefore judged as obviously immoral. Further out on the fuzzy fringes of this template are acts that are ambiguously victimizing, whether because they cause unclear damage, the damage is unintentional, or the person affected is not clearly vulnerable to suffering. Acts like prostitution and pornography might fit here and studies find that people are slower to judge these acts as victimizing/immoral compared with more obviously victimizing acts like murder (Ochoa, 2022).

As we have emphasized before, all concepts—including morality (McHugh et al., 2022)—are cognitively represented by schemas. These consist of a combination of core features, whose relative perception in a specific example leads that example to be more robustly categorized as a member of that category (Murphy, 2004).

Figure 4. Moral judgment is based on a fuzzy cognitive template of harm. This template is

defined as the perception of an intentional agent causing damage to a vulnerable patient

(Theory of Dyadic Morality). From Schein & Gray (2018), with permission.

The elements and structure of the moral dyad have been discussed at length elsewhere

as the Theory of Dyadic Morality (TDM; Schein & Gray, 2018), and have been extended to

connect with affect in the Affective Harm Account (AHA; Gray et al., 2022), which more

explicitly incorporates affect. We will not delve into the intricacies of dyadic morality but

will mention the phenomenon of dyadic completion (Gray et al., 2014).

Dyadic completion is the phenomenon where the existence of some of the elements of

the moral dyad (e.g., damage to a victim) nudge people to see the remaining elements of the

moral dyad (e.g., an intentional agent). This is an example of "filling-in" that the mind uses in

many cases, such as when you assume that a person with a lovely voice must also have a

lovely appearance, or picture something with fur when someone talks about their dog, even if

their pooch actually happens to be hairless.

Dyadic completion can occur when the presence of an agent and patient leads people

to see an evil act that causes harm. In one demonstration, participants read about ambiguous

nonsense acts with either an agent alone (e.g., "Jose stiped") or an agent acting upon a patient (e.g., "Jose stiped Louis"). People saw ambiguous actions with both an agent and patient as more immoral than with an agent alone (Hester et al., 2020), suggesting that people completed the link between agent and patient with a damaging act. As we saw above, dyadic completion occurs from agent to patient (i.e., victim) when people are convinced that "harmless" acts involving an intentional agent and strange behavior (e.g., bizarre fetishes) harm a victim (Gray et al., 2014).

Dyadic completion also occurs from patient to agent when people feel victimized by harmful acts without an obvious agent to blame. For example, when natural disasters kill many and victimize hundreds of other people, people often suggest these events are "act from God" to make sense of their suffering (Gray & Wegner, 2010b). It is too hard for people to believe that wide-scale human tragedy can just be random misfortune, and so they complete the dyad to blame a powerful agent. Cross-cultural data from 114 societies (Jackson et al., 2023) further underscore that people frequently ascribe to gods events that cause victimization (e.g., disease and natural hazards), but have no clear human perpetrator.

Our harm-based psychological template for moral judgment involves the combination of victims, agents, and damaging acts. Moral judgments are based on the *perceptions* of each of these elements. The more each of these elements are present, the more we condemn acts; but when acts are ambiguous, we can sometimes be motivated to fill in the missing elements.

3.2.5 Norms: Victimhood is Understood in Tandem with Norms

Before we move away from misconceptions of victimhood, it is important to revisit the idea of norms, because they help to address some criticisms of victimhood as a central force in moral judgment. As discussed above, people often make sense of whether something is counter-normative before engaging in the process of moral judgment. Witnessing a norm violation triggers us to compare it to our cognitive template of harm—to tease apart mere

norm violations (something that is just "wrong", or "bad," or "weird," like wearing pajamas to a professional development meeting) from something more immoral (like abusing animals) (e.g., Brennan et al., 2013).

Moral psychologists sometimes confuse merely counter-normative acts with immoral acts. The study of impurity is a good demonstration of this confusion, with moral psychologists using extremely bizarre and counter-normative acts like having sex with a dead chicken to represent acts of sexual impurity (Haidt et al., 1993). While many see these bizarre acts as somewhat wrong (and victimizing), studies show that part of the "wrongness" in judgments revolves around norm violations rather than *moral* wrongness (Gray & Keeney, 2015a). To study moral judgment in a way that applies to the real world, we should focus on more typical and less bizarre cases of immorality that people might actually encounter in their lives, like using examples of pornography or prostitution to capture impurity (Gray & Keeney, 2015b).

Acknowledging the role of norms helps to address one broad criticism against the importance of harm and victims in our moral minds—the worry about "wrongless victimization". We have discussed how moral psychologists mistakenly use so-called "harmless" or "victimless" wrongs to argue against the sweeping power of victimhood in morality. We saw how the idea of these acts falls apart when you properly understand victimhood is a perceived intuitive continuum. Another criticism against the idea of a victim-centric moral template is the existence of harmful acts that are not judged as wrong.

One paper (Royzman & Borislow, 2022) discusses two kinds of wrongless harms—boxing and breaking up with someone. The authors argue that both acts cause harm but are generally not seen as immoral, again collapsing continuums into binaries. But the bigger issue with these studies is the failure to recognize the importance of norms. Neither of these acts are counter-normative. Breaking up with someone is something that happens every day,

and so does boxing. It is normative to want to break up with someone who is not a good fit in your love life, and the entire existence of the idea of "boxing" as a formal sport with rules (i.e., codified norms) emphasizes that this is a normative activity. Moreover, the rules of boxing are made to ensure that harm is minimized.

The importance of norms is clear when people box or break up in a way that is counter-normative. If you punch below the belt or put razor blades in your boxing gloves, this will intentionally victimize your opponent and break the rules of boxing, earning moral condemnation from others. Likewise, if you broke up with someone in an extremely counter-normative way, like making a television commercial to air during the Super Bowl talking about how your partner is ugly and a poor lover, people would see that as more immoral because this kind of break up would seem to cause more victimization. If the authors of that study (Royzman & Borislow, 2022) had assessed intuitive perceptions of victimization, they surely would have found a tight link between them and judgments of immorality.

Harm and norms are sometimes connected, in that intentionally victimizing a vulnerable victim is typically counter-normative, but there are times they can be distinguished from each other. For instance, if you intentionally spank your child after they do something naughty, people see that as less immoral than hitting your child in another context. Part of this milder moral judgment is because spanking is more normative (at least in some places) but it is also typically driven by the broader intention of making children better behaved. This intention to help your child makes it unlike typical victimization. Likewise, in state-sanctioned violence like war, soldiers victimize soldiers from another country, but usually for the higher aim of preventing the destruction of your fellow citizens.

There are many more nuances between questions of norms and victimhood, and trade-offs in victimhood, but the key point is that victimhood, even if complex, seems to lie at the center of our moral judgments. If researchers would only measure intuitive perceptions of

victimhood, more studies would reveal its power to predict moral judgments. In fact, emerging work shows that perceptions of victimhood can explain political differences in moral judgments.

3.3 Explaining Political Differences in Moral Judgments

How should we make sense of disagreement between liberals and conservatives? Liberals and conservatives often use different moral rhetoric (Feinberg & Willer, 2013), and often seem to emphasize different values. For example, conservatives are more likely to discuss "liberty" whereas liberals are more likely to mention "labor solidarity," but these differences in conversation do not reflect deeper cognitive differences (Schein & Gray, 2018).

Among many values, the concept of "purity" is most frequently advanced as something that differs between liberals and conservatives, with MFT arguing that only conservatives really care about purity (Graham et al., 2018). However, Frimer and colleagues (2017) showed that liberals also care about purity (e.g., protecting the environment), evoking the concept of sacredness outside of a traditionally religious context. The problem with claims that liberals and conservatives have different core values is that tests of this hypothesis are biased towards conservatives (Frimer et al., 2014; Frimer et al., 2015). If you operationalize purity by focusing on religion and sex, you will inevitably "discover" that conservatives care more about purity because we have long known that conservatives are more concerned about these constructs (e.g., Haidt & Hersch, 2001).

Any concept can be operationalized in many ways, especially purity. Our recent review on purity finds that there are at least 9 ways to make sense of this messy idea, including respecting God, avoiding eating gross things, not thinking immoral thoughts (i.e., moral purity), and not engaging in sexual taboos (Gray et al., 2023). With this broader more accurate understanding of purity, it neither makes sense to tie it to a small foundation in the mind, nor argue that only conservatives care about it.

The reality is that both liberals and conservatives care about all sorts of different values and acts when they psychologically connect them to victimhood. As we have reviewed above, the more people see the violation of different values as causing harm to a vulnerable victim, the more they see that act as immoral. In this way, victimizing or harming someone is the universal "active ingredient" that transforms a mere value (or norm) violation into a moral wrong. Whether someone is unkind, or craven, or disrespectful, or arrogant, or pessimistic, or overly bold or not bold enough, those actions seem immoral based on how much they seem to victimize a vulnerable other (Ochoa, 2022, Schein & Gray, 2015).

The idea of victimization helps us transcend arguments about which values are cared about by which partisans, and also helps explain hot button issues. Different conceptions of victimhood are central to why people disagree about abortion (is the victim the mother or the fetus?), undocumented immigration (are the victims immigrants or citizens?), and capital punishment (are the more important victims those harmed by crime, or the innocent people executed?). To understand political differences across many moral issues, we need to understand who people see as a victim—what assumptions of vulnerability they hold.

3.4 Assumptions of Vulnerability

Assumptions of vulnerability can be defined as how much a target seems especially vulnerable to victimization or mistreatment. Importantly, this is an *assumption* because it is hard to know how much someone is vulnerable to harm. As we discussed when we reviewed the various lay definitions of victimhood, many factors make it impossible to arrive on a definitive answer of who or what is truly a victim, including the problem of other minds, competing statistical trends, and the ambiguity of moral responsibility. This ambiguity means that people are left to make an assumption about who qualifies as a victim.

In a series of studies, we developed a measure of these assumptions of vulnerability (AoVs; Womick et al., in prep) and then explored how much they explain political differences

on hot-button moral issues. This AoV measure was designed to be simple to answer and face valid. It consisted of three questions, which could be asked about any entity X that could be a potential victim.

1. X is especially vulnerable to being harmed

2. X is especially vulnerable to mistreatment

3. X is especially vulnerable to victimization.

These items asked who is "especially vulnerable" to harm because even though all people might agree that various targets are ultimately capable of being harmed (e.g., both citizens and immigrants), political debates hinge on relative questions of victimhood.

In one study, we assessed the AoVs of various entities often featured in partisan discourse, including undocumented immigrants, the environment, state troopers, and the Bible (Womick et al., in prep). As predicted, results indicated large differences across the political spectrum. Relative to conservatives, liberals viewed targets like undocumented immigrants and gay people as more vulnerable, and state troopers and the American flag as less vulnerable. In another study, we found that these AoVs helped explain the differences between liberals and conservatives in their rating of the moral foundations questionnaire (MFQ; Graham et al., 2011). To the extent that political partisans provide different answers to specific questions about loyalty to your country, or respecting religious leaders, those differences can be explained by perceptions of victimization. The idea of "moral foundations" is unnecessary to explain differences in MFQ responses; instead, you can account for these political differences through differing assumptions of vulnerability.

To make sense of broader political debates occurring today, we explored potential ad-hoc themes related to which types of entities liberals and conservatives are most likely to see as vulnerable to harm and victimization (Womick et al., in prep). We highlighted four themes

called *The Environment, The Othered, The Powerful, and the Divine,* where differing AoVs across the left and right help explain many contentious moral debates (see Figure 5).

The Environment includes targets within the natural world (e.g., animals, plants, and ecosystems). We often see people debate about environmental concerns, for example, disagreeing about which protections are necessary for waterways or wildlife or what policies are needed to combat climate change (or if climate change is even occurring). We tested whether differences in understanding of how vulnerable the environment is to harm (e.g., how vulnerable chimpanzees, frogs, and trees are) may explain why Democrats are much more supportive of environmental protections than Republicans (Pew Research Center, 2020). We found that indeed, liberals believed animals and plants in the environment were more prone to vulnerability than conservatives (Womick et al., in prep), explaining their greater willingness to support environment protections.

The Othered is centered on how vulnerable we see people who are marginalized or disadvantaged (e.g., illegal immigrants, racial minorities, etc.). This term comes from discussions by Simone de Beauvoire about those who are outside the traditional center of society and power (e,g., Stavro, 2007). Today we see many contentious debates related to those who are "othered". For example, there are contentious debates related to LGBTQ rights (e.g., bans on transgender people using the bathrooms of their choice) and debates about separating parents from their children who have crossed into the United States illegally. We explored whether there were ideological differences in understandings of whether these communities (e.g., LGBTQ people and illegal immigrants) are vulnerable to suffering. Results indicated liberals saw those who are "othered" as more vulnerable to harm than conservatives, explaining their greater support for these communities.

The Powerful refers to those who have resources and power in society (e.g., CEOs, police officers, the wealthy). While it may seem unlikely that people with power are also

vulnerable, some people believe these groups are especially vulnerable to harm because of their standing in society. For example, the All Lives Matter movement emphasizes the vulnerability to physical harm police officers face in their line of work. We tested how people understood the vulnerability of powerful targets like corporate leaders and state troopers. Conservatives (as compared to liberals) believed these powerful targets were especially vulnerable to harm, explaining why conservatives tend to view people with power as people prone to disadvantage (Cooper, 2020; Takahashi & Jefferson, 2021).

The Divine refers to spiritual or religious targets (e.g., God or the Bible). Today we see many debates related to the Divine, like whether the Bible should be taught in school or the role of religion in government. Many are concerned that the Divine are under attack. For example, some suggest that religious freedom is being threatened or that the Bible is not valued today in the same way it used to be. We explored whether different assumptions about the vulnerability of the Divine explain why people disagree on these topics. We asked people about how vulnerable targets like the Bible and God are and found that conservatives saw them as more vulnerable than liberals, explaining why conservatives are more concerned that the Bible and God can be harmed (Nwanevu, 2020).

These findings reveal how "informational assumptions" about victimhood—to use a term from Turiel (2006)—drive our moral judgments and policy views. Given that victimhood and harm are a matter of perception (Gray et al., 2022), partisans can disagree about who is vulnerable to harm (Womick et al., in prep), fueling conflict (Schein & Gray, 2015). Note that we are *not* saying that these are somehow the 4 ultimate themes of AoVs or that these 4 themes are deeply engrained in our mind (Womick et al., in prep). Rather, these are convenient clusters of characters that might make sense of ongoing debates.
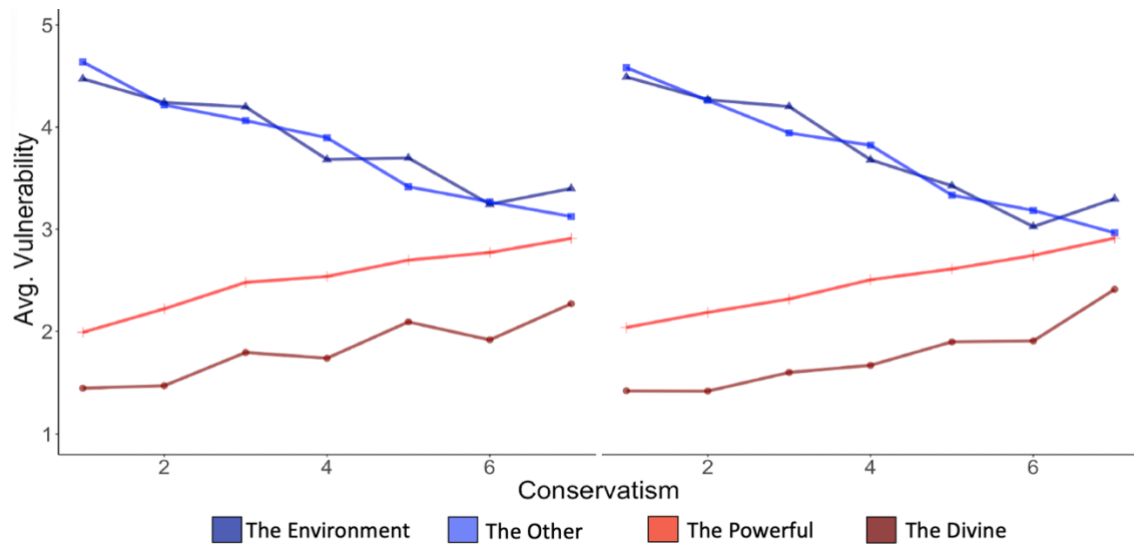
Figure 5. Liberals and conservatives see different targets as vulnerable to victimhood. Results from Study 4a (left panel) and Study 4b (right panel). From Womick et al. (in prep), with permission.

Abstracting beyond these political differences across AoV themes suggests an intriguing pattern in moral judgment that connects with broader political commitments. Relative to centrists, extreme liberals tend to amplify differences in perceived victimhood (viewing some groups as especially vulnerable and others as especially invulnerable), whereas extreme conservatives tend to minimize differences in perceived victimhood (viewing many targets as similarly vulnerable to victimization; see Figure 5). This ties in with the tendency of extreme liberals to divide the moral world into oppressors and the oppressed (Young, 2020), two different extremes of vulnerability, and conservatives' tendency to emphasize each person as a free and independent individual (Huntington, 1957).

The liberal amplification and conservative minimization of victimhood explains why liberals focus on questions of relative, group-based victimhood (e.g., the LGBTQ community is statistically more likely to be vulnerable to harm than state troopers), whereas conservatives are more focused on questions of absolute individual victimhood (e.g., a gay person and a corporate leader are both capable of experiencing harm and suffering). These

differences are perhaps most obvious with the debate between Black Lives Matter and All

Lives Matter. Liberals are more likely to support Black Lives Matter, which at its strongest

form casts policing and race in stark terms of vulnerable Black men and invulnerable police

(e.g., McCoy, 2020). On the other hand, conservatives are more likely to support All Lives

Matter, which not only highlights the general equality of potential victimhood, but also

highlights the vulnerability of police officers who risk their lives.

Although it seems like liberals are more generally inclined to divide the world into

hyper-vulnerable victims and insensitive oppressors, we all feel the pull of this dichotomy in

specific moral situations. That is, there may be political differences when thinking about the

potential of general groups to be victimized, but when we are confronted with someone's

actual victimization, there's a push for us to see them as 100% a victim, and to see the person

who harmed them 100% as a perpetrator. This drive to simplify our moral world is called

"moral typecasting."

3.5 Moral Typecasting

Who is a victim? This question runs through all the discussions in this chapter, where

we have covered definitions of victimhood, discussed the importance of victims in our moral

judgments, and covered what drives political differences in moral judgments. In this section,

we further explore the force of victimhood in distorting our perceptions. Just as gravity warps

the space-time continuum, victimhood warps our moral landscape via moral typecasting,

distorting both our perceptions of those who unjustly suffer and those who might have caused

that suffering.

Moral typecasting is the idea that we try to simplify our moral world by generally

seeing people as either victims or as those who victimize others (Gray & Wegner, 2009). This

idea grows out of the TDM (Schein & Gray, 2018), which recognizes the fact that people

divide the moral world into moral agents (those who harm and help victims) and moral

patients (those who are victimized). While some entities seem mostly like patients (e.g., children, puppies) and other entities seem mostly like agents (e.g., God, CEOs), most adult humans can theoretically be seen as either an agent or patient, a victim or a victimizer. But within any specific moral act, like murder or theft, you can generally be seen as only one or the other: if you are the person stealing, you are generally not the person being stolen from. Of course, you can harm yourself, but most canonically immoral acts occur when one person harms a different person.

Our mind extends this either/or separation between victim and victimizer from specific moral acts to moral perceptions in general, seeing others as generally either an agent or a patient (Gray & Wegner, 2009). This phenomenon is called "moral typecasting," because it takes inspiration from the idea of typecasting in Hollywood, where people perceive certain actors as only fitting certain acting roles, and not other acting roles. Typecasting is why it is hard to see Daniel Radcliffe as anyone other than Harry Potter, and moral typecasting is why it is hard to see serial killers as sympathetic victims, or sad orphans as evil.

Of course, if pushed, we might recognize that even evil doers are capable of being victimized, but moral typecasting (Gray & Wegner, 2009) creates a tension in our minds where villainy and victimhood seem inversely related, reducing the moral complexity of others. Moral typecasting is why blame is a zero-sum game between victims and perpetrators: the more a perpetrator is blamed, the less the victim is blamed (and vice versa) (Dyer et al., 2022). Another way to think about this phenomenon is that the more the recipient of harm seems like a victim, the more the doer of harm seems like a perpetrator.

Moral typecasting plays out in many high-stakes real-world situations. For example, recent research explores when people call 911 to report a traumatic event. Everyday people and police officers expect these callers to express a lot of emotion—to be a "feeling

victim"—and when people are more stoic, observers become suspicious that callers are actually perpetrators of crime (Salerno et al., 2023).

There are two main implications of moral typecasting. The first is that we ignore the pain of villains, seeing those who harm others as incapable of being victimized themselves. The second is that we blame victims less, seeing those who suffer harm as incapable of victimizing others. In other words, typecasting means there is a tension between blame and pain.

3.5.1 Ignoring the Pain of Villains

Each of us can suffer, but moral typecasting leads us to neglect the pain of villains. For example, when we think of someone evil like Hitler, we seldom wonder about his inner suffering, even though he was likely scared in his bunker as Ally troops approached or just as he was shooting himself in the head (Ruane, 2020). Of course, often in life, those who hurt people are likely to have been hurt by others before (e.g., via bullying; Dulmus et al., 2006), but it is often hard to recognize that fact. This is exemplified by the movie *Downfall* which was strongly critiqued for its portrayal of Hitler as capable of humanness (Eckardt, 2004).

In one empirical demonstration of the denial of evildoers' pain, participants were asked how much a variety of targets would feel pain if they stepped on a piece of glass without shoes on. The targets included villains (e.g., Ted Bundy), saints (e.g., Mother Theresa), people with disabilities (e.g., a man with Down Syndrome) and neutral targets (e.g., a high school teacher). The study revealed that people saw villains as extremely unable to feel pain (Gray & Wegner, 2009), making them less like victims as compared to others. This facet of moral typecasting is consistent with other work finding that people feel less sympathy for those they blame (e.g., Weiner, 1991).

3.5.2 Victims Are Less Blameworthy

Typecasting means that those who are blamed are seen less like victims. The flip side of this phenomenon is that the more people seem sensitive to pain (i.e., victims) the less they are blamed (i.e., the less they seem like a perpetrator). Our own research has shown how victims are seen as less blameworthy. In one study, Gray and Wegner (2011) participants read about George, who was paid $600 every week. In one condition, the hero condition, George gave $100 to charity every week. In the neutral condition, George used $100 to buy himself something every week. In the victim condition, George's boss stole $100 from him every week. Participants then read that George saw a woman drop $10, and that he picked the money up and kept it. Participants were next asked how blameworthy George was for his actions. Those in the hero condition saw George as most blameworthy for his actions and those in the victim condition saw George as the least blameworthy, showing that prior victimization makes us seem less blameworthy for our actions. Other studies find that people are less likely to even remember the misdeeds of victims relative to other targets (Gray & Wegner, 2011a), and that those who are generally seen as more vulnerable to victimhood (e.g., those with developmental disabilities) are less capable of being blamed (Gray & Wegner, 2009).

Moral typecasting means that when we view people as victims or villains, we not only place them in that enduring moral role, but also see them as having curiously one-sided minds (Gray et al., 2012), which in turn shapes how we view their future responsibility and vulnerability to suffering (Gray & Wegner, 2009). When we typecast people as victims, we see them as having a mind that is less capable of thinking and planning, meaning they earn less blame, and we see them as more likely to experience pain and suffering. On the other hand, when we typecast people as villains (and heroes) we believe they are less capable of experiencing suffering and are more blameworthy for their actions (e.g., Gray & Wegner, 2009; Gray & Wegner, 2011a).

Importantly, these ideas co-exist with victim blaming because victimhood is a matter of perception (Gray et al., 2022). When we blame victims, we no longer see them as moral victims because they are blameworthy for the harm they suffer (and thus, at least in our eyes, are no longer "real victims"). However, when we recognize these individuals as true victims who are not responsible for the harm they face, then we see them as less blameworthy for their actions (e.g., Gray & Wegner, 2011).

3.5.3 Applications, Extensions, and Critiques of Moral Typecasting

Moral typecasting helps explain how differing perceptions about moral acts can polarize people. Consider two celebrity cases where people disagreed: Will Smith slapping Chris Rock at the Academy Awards, and the court case between actors and ex-lovers Amber Heard versus Johnny Depp.

When Will Smith slapped Chris Rock for mocking his wife Jada Pinkett at the academy awards, some saw Will Smith as an unhinged villain and Chris Rock as the victim. But others saw Chris Rock as the villain for the insult, and Will Smith as a hero who defended his victimized wife. Similarly, in the case of Depp vs Heard, Johnny Depp sued his ex-wife Amber Heard for defamation after she accused him of domestic abuse. Some saw Amber Heard as the vulnerable victim of abuse, and Johnny Depp as a ruthless abuser, whereas others saw Heard as a scheming shrew and Depp as an innocent victim. No matter peoples' initial impression, moral typecasting polarized their opinion, driving them to assign all the victimhood to one person and all the villainous traits to the other person. We should note that debates about domestic violence often involve disagreements over who is the true victim or villain in the situation, though in general, women tend to be the victims of domestic violence (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2020).

Moral typecasting is most obvious in arguments about villains and victimhood, but it is worth noting that it can often apply to heroes as well. Moral typecasting is technically the

inverse relation between perceptions of moral patients and moral agents, and moral agents

can include both villains (who victimize) and heroes (who help victims). When we think of

acts of heroism, the person who is being helped is usually not the person who is doing the

helping, and so typecasting is also a tension between heroism and victimhood (Gray &

Wegner, 2009). Data shows that we often ignore the pain of heroes, seeing them less as

victims. For example, in the study mentioned above where people read about different targets

stepping on a piece of glass without shoes on, people saw heroes as feeling less pain than

everyday people (although still more pain than villains; Gray & Wegner, 2009).

In a follow-up study, participants were asked to imagine they had pills that caused

either pleasure or pain. Participants were asked to divide the pills between pairs of people,

who included people who were heroes, villains, victims, or neutral people. Given that people

tend to view moral agents as less capable of experiencing pain, we predicted that people

would give them more pain and less pleasure. This is exactly what occurred. In general,

people were most willing to give morally bad agents (villains) pain pills, followed by heroes,

neutral targets, and then patients. On the other hand, people were most willing to give

pleasure pills to patients, followed by neutral targets, heroes, and then villains (Gray &

Wegner, 2009). These results highlight not only how perceptions of moral agency and

victimhood/patiency are inversely related, but also reveal that people are surprisingly willing

to treat heroes poorly despite their good deeds. However, we note that the effects of

typecasting are often less robust for good doers, especially when people see those good doers

as motivated by feelings of compassion or empathy, because experiencing feelings is the

hallmark of vulnerable moral patients.

Further revealing the complexity of moral typecasting and good doers is work

revealing that perceptions of goodness and victimhood can sometimes co-occur. In one study,

people saw those who had their iPad stolen or who were verbally attacked as more

trustworthy and moral (Jordan & Kouchaki, 2021). These results show that people generally think well of victims; after all, these people have already been victimized and so people want to be kind to them.

When you zoom out from the literature, moral typecasting seems to apply most when using unambiguous manipulations and measurements of victimhood and villainy (and often heroes). Moral typecasting is a tension between those who people see strongly as victims and villains (and sometimes heroes), not just those who have once suffered mild harm. Indeed, this same paper about "virtuous victims" fails to find this effect with those who are more strongly victimized, (i.e., victims of sexual assault; Jordan & Kouchaki, 2021).

Another critique of moral typecasting is that we sometimes dehumanize those who have done wrong, as in one study where people dehumanized a mugger, seeing them as less capable of thought than a neutral person (Khamitov et al., 2016). These results are interesting, but we distinguish between someone who impulsively did a bad thing once versus someone who seems like a general victimizer. Impulsively mugging someone might be bad and certainly victimizes someone, but someone who seizes an opportunity to take someone's money is much less obviously a "villain" than someone who we see as generally cold and callous. Along similar lines, other research has found that people dehumanize victims who have previously committed immoral acts (Mercier et al., 2023), suggesting that being a victim in the moment does not necessarily negate their immoral acts and "villainous" character overall. These perspectives on typecasting (Khamitov et al., 2016; Jordan & Kouchaki, 2021) are important because they reveal when typecasting most powerfully applies: when we are thinking about moral character.

3.6 Moral Character

Moral psychology research has mostly focused on judgments of acts, but an emerging body of work explores perceptions of moral character. When we say that someone's moral

character is a villain or a victim, we are making a statement beyond any specific incident; instead, we are saying that their moral quality *as a person* is doing evil or being victimized (Cohen & Morse, 2014). Judgments of moral character have been studied by scholars under the term "person-centered morality" (Uhlmann et al., 2015), and these judgments are important because they help inform who we should cooperate with (e.g., Carlson et al., 2022; Jackson et al., 2023; Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2012).

Although moral character is about someone's inner moral essence, this essence is most obviously revealed to us via specific acts, something scholars of person-center morality acknowledge (Uhlmann et al., 2015). The links between acts and character is usually straightforward, for example, the eviler the acts that someone does, the more they are generally seen as possessing an evil character. At the same time, character judgments can become dissociated from judgments of acts. For example, in one study by Tannenbaum and colleagues (2011), people read about someone who became enraged after learning his girlfriend had been cheating on him. In one condition, the man beat up his girlfriend, and in the other, he beat up her cat. Participants saw the girlfriend beating man's *actions* as more immoral but saw the cat-beating man's moral *character* as more immoral.

Some scholars interpret this act-character dissociation as suggesting that character judgments may not revolve around victimhood (Uhlmann et al., 2015), but a broader look at the literature again highlights the power of victimhood. Moral character judgments seem to focus on someone's general capacity to victimize someone else. In the case of girlfriend beating versus cat beating, a cat-beater is more likely to generally victimize someone in other contexts, in part because beating a cat is so counter-normative. Supporting this reasoning, people infer that those who do impure but "harmless" actions like picking up dog poop barehanded or licking someone's shoe are generally seen as having worse moral character and are perceived as more likely to perpetrate harm (Chakroff & Young, 2015). Here, people

make more person-based attributions (e.g., a certain kind of person would do this) when

actions are impure (like picking up dog poop barehanded) and more situation-based

attributions (e.g., certain situations could make a person do this) when actions are harmful

(e.g., kicking someone in the shin). This explains why you would avoid asking someone who

has sex with a dead chicken to be a babysitter, not merely because it suggests a generally bad

moral character, but because you think that they could harm your kids.

      In our own review of moral character, we map out a triangular landscape of character

judgments (see Figure 6). The corners of this triangle are grounded by three prototypical

extremes: heroes, villains, and victims. Of course, in real life people can be mixes of these

elements, and people can blend these elements in their perceptions, but as with moral

typecasting, our minds seek to simplify the space of morality, especially when it comes to

enduring perceptions of moral character. People are inherently essentialist about both the

characteristics of people (e.g., Heiphetz, 2020) and morality (i.e., moral vitalism; Bastian et

al., 2015), and so people are naturally essentialist about moral character. You can see these

moral character extremes in many classic tales, where an evil heartless villain (e.g., evil

witch) harms a poor vulnerable victim (e.g., damsel in distress), who then needs to be rescued

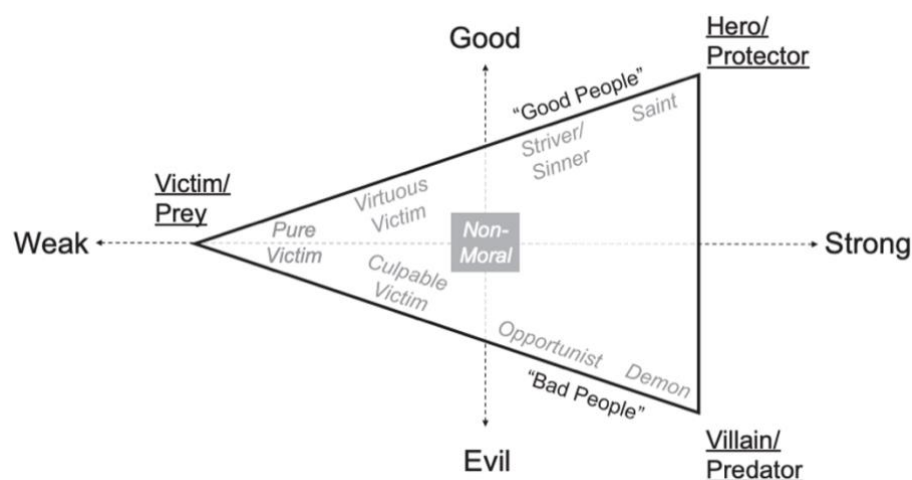by a strong hero (e.g., a brave prince; see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Taxonomy of moral character. Taken from Hartman et al. (2022a) with permission.

In real life, people can be shades of good, evil, and victims. The truly heroic may be seen as saints, but everyday people who still try to do good may be thought of as strivers instead. Truly evil people might be understood as demonic villains, whereas a milder evil person might be merely seen as an opportunist. With victims, you could imagine a completely innocent victim like an orphan child, or you can imagine a victim that might seem to have some small role in their suffering, like a traveler kidnapped after ignoring the travel warnings from their government. Even if perceptions of other people's everyday moral character fall somewhere between extremes, there still exists a tension between these various roles, which is why perceptions of heroism and villainy are inversely related.

The axes of this triangle are simple. The north-south axis is good versus evil. This is the classic distinction we understand our worlds by (Farley, 1990) and is often a basic determination we use in our lives to determine who we can trust and who we cannot (Everett et al., 2016). The tension between good and evil is obvious in many religions (e.g., saints vs demons) and is the most basic distinction in moral judgment (determining right from wrong).

The east-west axis focuses on strength (strong vs weak). This is the axis that helps us determine whether someone is a moral agent or a moral patient. If you think back to the section on moral typecasting, moral agents are those who do moral deeds — they help and harm others — whereas moral patients are those who receive moral deeds, namely people who get victimized and who need help. This landscape is a triangle instead of the square, because in other work we find that people generally do not distinguish between those who are victimized by villains and those who are helped by heroes (i.e., beneficiaries; Goransen et al., 2022), likely because we tend not to worry about helping someone unless they have been somehow victimized in the past.

Much of the past work on moral character has looked at judgments of evil, revolving around people who break norms and harm others. More recent work is also examining

judgments of good moral character, because these judgments feed into our decisions of whether to cooperate with others, and cooperation is crucial for avoiding harm in society (Curry, 2016; Jackson et al., 2023). For example, our work has found that people in big anonymous societies are especially likely to rely on global perceptions of moral character when choosing cooperation partners (Jackson et al., 2023). In big societies there are so many potential partners that we can only keep track of one holistic summary of their cooperation potential (i.e., their moral character). In smaller scale societies, people know others in more detail, so you might know if someone will cooperate when it comes to food sharing, but not cooperate when it comes to hunting.

Relatively little work has examined character judgments of victimhood, and so future work should explore general perceptions of how we decide whether someone is generally a victim. Our lab has done some work on this topic through the lens of mind perception and moral typecasting. We find that those who are seen to be generally more capable of feeling emotions, and more generally vulnerable to harm are seen as victims, whereas those who are seen as generally more agentic — possessing strong capacities for planning and self-control — are less likely to be seen as victims (Gray & Wegner, 2009).

To delve more into who is generally seen as a victim, it is useful to consider three aspects that people rely upon when making moral character judgments (Hartman et al., 2022a): 1) behavior (e.g., how much you have been victimized), 2) mind (e.g., how much your mental capacities predispose you to victimhood) 3) and identity (e.g., how much members of your group are likely to be victimized). Questions of behavior relate to whether someone has actually been victimized or not, whereas questions of mind and identity point back to our discussions of definitions at the beginning of the chapter. Mind is about whether someone has a mind capable of victimhood, and identity is about whether someone belongs to a group that is generally more likely to be victimized.

Perceptions of mind and identity can combine to create stereotypes that lend themselves to victim perceptions. The most obvious stereotype of victimhood revolves around gender, where people assume that women are more likely to be victimized than men (see van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). As we mentioned above, statistical evidence suggests that this assumption is largely true, but there are cases when it is not, such as when men are victimized by their wives through domestic abuse and often not believed. In line with these ideas, in a series of studies Reynolds and colleagues (2020), explored peoples' stereotypes of victims and perpetrators and found that people assumed workplace victims were more likely to be women than men. Participants also viewed it as more morally wrong to harm women than men. Taken together, these results highlight how our perceptions of people, and their general characteristics and identities can drive how we see their capacity for victimhood.

3.6.1 Empathy Towards Victims

When we perceive someone as an innocent victim, our heart often goes out to them, we empathize with them (Weiner, 1993), whether those victims are harmed by companies (Xu et al., 2021), generally suffer injustice (Urbanska et al., 2019), or are disadvantaged by political policies (Harff, 1987). Empathy towards victims can extend from individuals to groups. In one experiment, Batson and colleagues (1997) induced empathy towards a homeless man (Harold) by showing he was not responsible for his homelessness (e.g., losing his job due to health problems). After reading about Harold, participants felt more empathy towards both this specific homeless man and homeless people in general.

Feelings of empathy can motivate pro-social behavior (Stephan & Finlay, 1999), encouraging people to help the injured (Decety et al., 2016) and to donate their money, time, and resources (Fu et al., 2022). Some argue empathy is an essential moral force and that feeling of empathy can guide our moral compasses (Zaki, 2018), and help us get along with others and build communal harmony (Sezov, 2002). However, it is important to note that

empathy is ultimately driven by our perceptions of others as moral victims (Schein & Gray, 2018), suggesting that victimhood is the fundamental moral force.

Although empathy is powerful, our emotional connection to victims has limits. Most people do not like being confronted with the suffering of other people because it makes them feel uncomfortable, and so they may try to avoid feeling engaged with those feelings. It is also hard to feel empathy when many people are suffering because it becomes overwhelming (e.g., Cameron et al., 2019). Empathy is also parochial in that we only typically feel it towards those we know, leading to an *empathy gap* (see Behler & Berry, 2022) between nearby others whose suffering is familiar to us versus those whose lives seem very different. It is harder for Westerners to empathize with a goat herder in sub-Saharan Africa whose herd is stolen than with an American who is spurned on social media, even though the former is clearly a worse fate.

People are more likely to be empathic toward specific victims (e.g., a specific child in poverty) rather than statistical or unidentified victims (e.g., the hundreds of millions of children in poverty across the world). This *identifiable victim effect* has long been observed by scholars (e.g., Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997; Lee & Feeley, 2016; Schelling, 1968). Highlighting the importance of identifiable victims, in one study Small and Loewenstein (2003) gave participants $5.00 and told them they could donate any amount of the $5.00 they wanted to a charity that builds homes for people in need. Some participants were told about specific identifiable victims that would be helped whereas others were told this donation would help people in need (but there was no identifiable victim). When victims were identified, people donated more (Small & Loewenstein, 2003).

It may seem counterintuitive that people would be *more* empathic and willing to help a single victim rather than many people in need, but many psychological mechanisms explain this effect. Identifiable victims cause more distress than statistical/nonidentified victims

(Kogut & Ritov, 2005), and it is easier to help single victims than millions of them, and people want their help to be effective (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997). Perhaps the most identifiable victim to people is themselves.

4. The Self as a Victim

We not only see others as victims, but also ourselves. While it may seem like nobody would want to identify as a victim because the word seems synonymous with weakness and suffering, there are positive outcomes when people see you as a victim, including escaping blame, earning sympathy, and gaining moral protections. Importantly, we are not suggesting that victims are "advantaged" by these potential outcomes, especially because of the obvious costs of authentic suffering. However, some people may strategically claim victimhood even when they may have suffered less than others, an idea we discuss later in this section. First, we explore the psychological processes of identifying yourself as a victim.

Many people can see themselves as victims because of the ambiguity in how victimhood is defined. Recall that victimhood can be defined in three ways. The first is the *individual victim*—a target capable of experiencing harm. The second is the *statistical-* or *group-based victim*—a target who is statistically likely to be victimized by virtue of their identity, and the third is the *moral victim*—a target seen as undeserving of the harm experienced. While people use these definitions to determine whether others are victims or not, people also use these definitions to determine whether they themselves have been victimized. People can ask themselves "Am I suffering?" "Am I part of group likely to be victimized?" and "Am I deserving of this harm?"

We all experience harm and suffering, which can make us feel like individual victims. For example, over 1.2 billion people will be displaced due to climate change and natural disasters by 2050 (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020). Of course, suffering from climate change and natural disasters are not necessarily the same as being a moral victim of a

cheating spouse, or abusive parent, but people still infer some moral weight behind even impartial victimization (Gray & Wegner, 2010b).

While some objective suffering is inescapable, there is the question of relative suffering. Who is more or less likely to experience suffering? It is likely that people will more frequently see themselves as (potential) victims if they are part of marginalized communities. For example, we know trans people are more likely to be victims of hate crimes than non-trans people (Flores et al., 2022), people of color are more likely to face prejudice than white people (Blendon et al., 2017), and women are more likely than men to experience discrimination in the workplace (Pew Research Center, 2017). It makes sense that people who are members of these groups—groups statistically likely to experience victimization—are likely to also see themselves as more prone to victimhood.

Importantly, as with understandings of others' victimization, one's own victimhood is a matter of perception, which means that people who are not statistically likely to be victimized can still feel like they are especially vulnerable to harm. For example, some White men believe they are prone to victimization even though, statistically speaking, they are least vulnerable to victimization. Scholars see self-focused victim exaggeration when powerful White men claim that they are targeted by false accusations of sexual assault (e.g., Kelly, 2020; Banet-Weiser, 2021) or that they are victims of "reverse discrimination" (Coston & Kimmel, 2012).

Although it is easy to be cynical when people seem to unjustly claim victimhood, there is a more basic explanation for why people so easily see themselves as sufferers: their suffering is obvious to them. As we reviewed above, the problem of other minds means that the suffering of other people is ultimately off-limits to us. However, there is nothing more obvious to us than our own suffering. We must infer if someone's tears are connected to real pain, but no inference is needed for our own pain. In fact, when we are in pain there is

nothing more real because pain overwhelms our consciousness (e.g., Scarry, 1985) and so it is no wonder that someone who is suffering feels like a victim.

Whether or not someone is in pain, the most crucial question for self-perceptions of victimhood is whether they feel like a *moral* victim. Moral victims are people whose pains and hardships are not only undeserved but bestowed upon them by callous others. People who see themselves as moral victims feel *victimized*. While there are many objectively victimized people (e.g., a child being abused or a Jewish person suffering a hate crime attack) self-focused moral victimhood is especially in the eye of the beholder. Some people have suffered much pain at the hands of others and still do not perceive themselves as an overall victim, including the Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl who used his experience in the concentration camps to make sense of the human condition and meaning in life (Frankl, 1985). On the other hand, others can feel like victims after being treated rudely by retail staff. Self-perceptions of victimhood can powerfully impact behavior, but before we explore these, we must first examine self-perceptions of moral character, especially of victimhood.

4.1 A Model of Self-Perceived Moral Character

As we discussed above, people connect moral acts to moral character (Uhlmann et al., 2015), and researchers often explore perceptions of other people's moral character, especially whether they seem good or evil (e.g., Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2012). Even though morality is central to our understanding of human beings (Strohminger & Nichols, 2014), there is much less work on how people make sense of their own moral character. In fact, some argue that our moral identities serve a basic psychological need for positive psychological functioning (Prentice et al., 2019).

Some work by Aquino and colleagues examines how much we see ourselves as good people (Aquino et al., 2009; Aquino & Reed, 2002), and these perceptions are consistent with peoples' behavior. Most people view themselves as morally good people (Tappin & McKay,

2016), although this can shift depending on social comparisons (e.g., compared to Nelson

Mandela am I really a good person?) and based on how our culture defines what "good"

really means (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013; Rai & Fiske, 2011).

While people usually view themselves as moral agents for good, the moral world is

rich, with a variety of characters who do and/or receive both good and evil. The TDM

(Schein & Gray, 2018) suggests that morality includes both good versus evil and moral

agents (those who do moral acts) versus moral patients (those who receive moral acts;

Goranson et al., 2022). The intersection of these two dimensions provides the moral roles of

heroes (good agents), villains (bad agents), victims (recipients of harm) and beneficiaries

(recipients of help). In practice, the psychological distinction between victims and

beneficiaries is small (Goranson et al., 2022), because we seldom worry about helping

someone who has not first been harmed (Schein & Gray, 2018).

A recent scale for assessing people's self-perceptions of moral character is the *Moral*

Identity Picture Scale (MIPS; Goranson et al., 2022), which uses 16 vivid pictures to assess

self-identification with these four moral roles (i.e., heroes, villains, victims, and beneficiaries)

and the two dimensions of agency and valence (see Figure 7 for example measures from

MIPS). After seeing each image, participants rate how much they identify with each person in

the photo. The use of pictures in this measure has a variety of benefits. Image based measures

increase participant engagement (Puleston, 2011) and help immerse people further into the

activity, an idea in-line with narrative transportation research (e.g., Oschatz & Marker, 2020;

see Green & Appel, this volume).

Figure 7. Examples of Pictures from the Moral Identity Picture Scale. Top image represents

victim/villain, bottom image represents hero/beneficiary. From Goranson et al. (2022), with

permission.

So how do people morally identify themselves? Goranson and colleagues (2022)

found that people generally see themselves more like heroes (i.e., agentic moral do-gooders)

and less like victims. People also see themselves more like victims than villains, preferring to

identify as blameless recipients of harm versus callous doers of harm. The only group of

people who defied this preference in our studies were Duke University MBA students, who

were more comfortable with the idea of harming others to achieve a goal (see Figure 8).

There are important correlates of self-identifying with these moral roles. Those who

identify more with heroes tend to have more self-efficacy, empathy, extraversion, and were

less likely to be depressed. Identifying as a villain was correlated with deception,

materialism, and narcissism, and was negatively associated with agreeableness. Victim

identification was associated with greater depression and deception, and lower extraversion and emotional stability (Goranson et al., 2022).
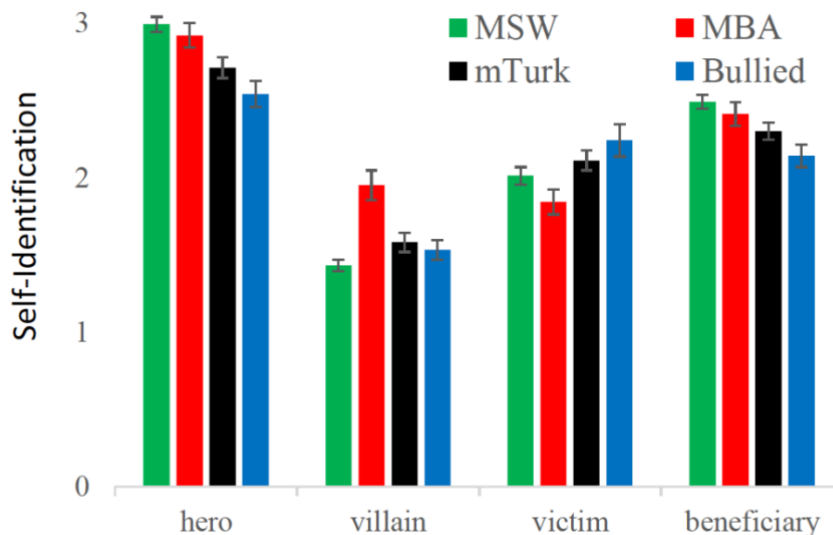

Figure 8. Self-identification with each moral role using MIPS. MSW: University of North Carolina Master of Social Work Students; MBA: Duke University Master of Business Administration Students; MTurk: sample of MTurk workers; Bullied: sample of people who reported being bullied. Used with permission from Goranson et al. (2022).

4.2 Who Feels Like a Victim

Some people are more disposed to seeing themselves as victims (or villains), and studies suggest that the tendency to identify oneself as facing interpersonal victimhood is a personality construct that varies across people (Gabay et al., 2020; Gollwitzer & Rothmund, 2011). The *Tendency for Interpersonal Victimhood* (TIV) measure includes the components of 1) need for recognition 2) moral elitism 3) lack of empathy and 4) rumination.

Need for recognition centers on victims' motivation to be recognized and to receive empathy (Hameiri & Nagler, 2017; Noor et al., 2012), which are evidenced both in intergroup and interpersonal conflicts where victims demand that perpetrators accept guilt and take responsibility (Baumeister et al., 1994; Twali et al., 2020). This drive for recognition can be

more or less justified. In the more justified vein, after hundreds of children's remains were

found on residential school properties in Canada, indigenous communities called on leaders

of the Catholic Church to apologize for their harmful role in residential schools (e.g., forced

assimilation and abuse; Shivaram, 2022). In the less justified vein, some demand sincere

apologies for accidental affronts like bumping into them on the subway.

      The second component of the tendency for interpersonal victimhood is moral elitism,

which occurs in cases where victims view themselves as morally superior (Leahy, 2012),

seeing their own actions as highly moral and the perpetrator as highly immoral (Gabay et al.,

2020). Moral elitism gives victims a sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem, which is helpful

for people who have suffered real harm (Urlic et al., 2010), but in cases where people's

perceptions of victimhood are inflated, it can make interpersonal interactions difficult.

      Third, victims tend to lack empathy for others because they are focused on their own

suffering (Urlic et al., 2010), especially in cases of intergroup conflict where groups are

fighting over claims of victimhood. Because of moral typecasting, groups view their

victimization as exclusive (Gray & Wegner 2009), and this either us/or them tension leads

people to deny the suffering of their rivals (Noor et al., 2012). Seeing oneself as a victim can

also lead to anti-social attitudes and behaviors (e.g., entitlement and aggressive behaviors;

Zitek et al., 2010), and can drive endorsements of political violence (Hameiri et al., 2023).

      Victims also tend to ruminate about their suffering. Rumination occurs both within

interpersonal conflicts (McCullough et al., 1998) and intergroup disputes (Ulric et al., 2010).

Rumination can sometimes turn to aggression (Li et al., 2021), and those who score high on

the tendency for interpersonal victimhood are more likely to seek revenge and make negative

attributions about others, including assumptions of malicious intent (Gabay et al., 2020). This

is an extension of moral typecasting, the more one person in a moral dyad seems like a

suffering victim, the more the other person seems like a malicious evil doer (Gray & Wegner, 2009; Gray & Wegner, 2008).

Other scholars have found that people high in this victimhood tendency are more likely to also hold a "vigilante identity," which involves monitoring for wrongdoing and punishing those who are perceived as wrong doers (Chen et al., 2022). It is important to remember that while people may *feel* like a victim, there may be debate about whether they are objectively a victim, especially when they belong to powerful majority groups (Harper, 2023). Likewise, people can be victimized but not see themselves as victims (Mégret, 2018), including people who experience rape but do not consider themselves victims (Kahn & Mathie, 2000). Again, harm and victimhood are a matter of perception (Gray et al., 2022).

Given that victimhood invites lots of attention (McCullough et al., 2003), compassion, and empathy from others (Weiner, 1993), leads people to donate and behave pro-socially (e.g., Small & Lowenstein, 2003), and reduces perceived responsibility for one's actions (Gray & Wegner, 2011a), people with Dark Triad personality traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) are inclined to claim victimhood (Ok et al., 2021). This is Ie people with Dark Triad personalities tend to have low self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2010) driving their need for attention (a need met by seeming to be a victim). Further, they are willing to deceive and manipulate to reach their personal goals (Chein et al., 2021; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), making them willing to exaggerate, lie, and inflate their stories of victimization to reap the potential benefits of victimhood (e.g., attention and resources).

4.3 Victimhood Can License Bad Behavior

Self-perceptions of victimhood can impact people's behavior, and sometimes not for the better. For example, claims of victimhood among those with narcissistic personality traits predicts unethical behaviors (e.g., lying to earn a bonus; Ok et al., 2021), and other work finds that those who feel victimized in the workplace are more likely to sabotage workplace

productivity (Hongbo et al., 2018). In other words, victimhood licenses people (in certain circumstances) to act immorally, and part of the reason lies in moral typecasting (Gray & Wegner, 2009): when we view ourselves as moral victims, it becomes difficult to see ourselves as blameworthy perpetrators, even when we do something that many see as immoral. These feelings of victimhood-derived blamelessness can justify additional unethical acts, especially when these acts seem to right self-perceived wrongs.

Work on *moral self-licensing* (Merritt et al., 2010; Effron & Conway, 2015) has explored how people intuitively balance the morality of their behavior, believing that previous good deeds (or being seen as a good person) frees them to act immorally. For example, in one study (Clot et al., 2018), participants who imagined themselves doing good deeds (versus a control condition) both viewed themselves more positively (e.g., seeing themselves as more generous and compassionate), and later engaged in more anti-social behavior (i.e., appropriating funds from their university).

Unethical self-licensing is especially likely to occur when we are reminded of our own victimhood. For example, in one experiment, Zitek and colleagues (2010), found that when people were reminded of their previous victimization (i.e., by writing an essay about a time in the past they had been wrong), they were less willing to help others (i.e., help the experimenter with a pilot test for another project). Our own research has also shown how being victimized can lead us (at least in some cases) to act anti-socially. In one study, Gray and colleagues (2014b) found that when people were victimized by a previous participant withholding money, they were more willing to "pay forward" that economic victimization to another innocent participant.

Other research has suggested people can use claims of victimhood to counter accusations of discrimination, an idea called *digressive victimhood* (Danbold et al., 2022). Here, members of dominant groups (e.g., those with high power and status) invoke

mistreatment in a different domain to deflect blame when they are accused of being a perpetrator. For example, some Christian Americans respond to claims of homophobia by claiming that they are victimized by threats to religious freedoms, and some White Americans respond to accusations of racism by claiming that they are victimized by threats to free speech. Digressive victimhood showcases the flexibility of perceived victimhood as it applies to the self, and how it applies to modern moral conflict. This flexibility of self-perceived victimhood not only sets the stage for conflict, but also allows people to move away from seeing themselves as a victim via moral transformation.

4.4 Moral Transformation

People can transition their self-perceived moral identities (e.g., from villain to victim or from victim to hero), and this moral transformation can have broad impacts. For example, when everyday people are led to think of themselves as a hero by donating to charity, they become physically stronger. In one study (Gray, 2010), participants who donated one dollar to charity (versus keeping it for themselves) could hold a 5 lb. dumbbell for longer, and in another study, those who wrote about themselves as a hero could also hold the weight for longer. Interestingly those who wrote a fictional story about themselves as a villain, in which they harmed innocent people, also held the weight for longer (Gray, 2010), suggesting that when we see ourselves as any moral agent, whether good or evil, we physically transform into stronger and more powerful people.

One way that people can morally transform is from a neutral moral character into the victim role, such as when they are harmed by others or fall ill (e.g., the sick role; Mechanic & Volkart, 1961). In addition to receiving harm, another way people can transform into *perceived* victims is by defending their moral self-concept after acting unethically. As we touched on above, most people dislike feeling like a villain (Goranson et al., 2022), and so to escape blame they see their moral character as a victim (Gray & Wegner, 2011a),

emphasizing how their suffering and powerlessness justifies their immorality (e.g., Hongbo et al., 2018).

Just as people can slip into the role of victim, they can transcend it. One way is by becoming a villain. Even though people usually do not like seeming evil, some may feel that it is better to have a sense of agency by doing harm, than to be a victim. This sense of agency can arise from returning the harm back to those who have harmed us (e.g., vengeance against the person who victimized us). The power of revenge to animate and empower previous victims is a longstanding narrative in many societies, from ancient Eastern myths to modern Western comic books and movies (Gordon et al., 2010; Heyne, 2007). However, empirical work suggests that the quest for revenge may not provide longstanding psychological benefits for those pursuing it (Carlsmith et al., 2008).

Beyond seeking vengeance, victims can also transform into villains by harming others. There is a saying that "hurt people, hurt people" which suggests that past victims (e.g., the bullied) often become future perpetrators of harm (e.g., the bully; Dulmus et al., 2006), but it seems that these abused-turned-abusers may not perceive themselves as villains, but instead maintain their identification as victims, which may help them avoid blame.

Perhaps the most generative form of moral transformation is to become a hero. The transition from victim to hero is implicit within much of the posttraumatic growth literature. People who see positive personal growth after suffering crises often find more meaning in life, a greater sense of personal strength, and a greater appreciation for life in general (Fayaz, 2023; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). To encourage this post-traumatic growth, the therapeutic literature recommends that people should feel more like survivors—overcomers of trauma— than victims (e.g., Karp et al., 1998), which gives the victimized a voice and helps them feel empowered as they overcome past traumas (Herbst, 1992).

One way to transform people's self-perceptions, which includes their personal narratives and life stories (Hibshman, 2022), is to leverage powerful cultural narratives of heroism, viewing your life story as heroic. Joseph Campbell (1949) identified the Hero's Journey as a universal narrative arc present in stories across time and culture, from Gilgamesh to Star Wars. Campbell's (1949) formulation of the Hero's Journey included 17 specific steps, but some of the steps were very specific (e.g., taking a "magic flight", like Frodo Baggins flying on giant eagles) and others are less relevant for today (e.g., "women as temptresses").

Rogers and colleagues (2023) simplified Campbell's original narrative arc to 7 simple steps (see Figure 9): the hero (the Protagonist) experiences a change in their lives (Shift) which leads them towards a new goal (Quest). During this quest they connect with friends and/or mentors (Allies), and face obstacles (Challenges). These experiences allow the hero to grow from their experiences (Transformation), which allows them to return home and help their community (Legacy).

Figure 9. Distilled formulation of the Hero's Journey. From Rogers et al (2023), with permission.

Importantly, the Hero's Journey is not only for characters with supernatural powers or especially brave people. We can all feel like heroes in our own lives, morally transforming ourselves to be more heroic. Rogers and colleagues (2023) developed a self-report scale called the Hero's Journey Scale in which people can identify how much their own lives feature these 7 elements. Multiple studies reveal that the more "heroic" people rate their own lives, the clearer their sense of self, the stronger their self-perceived social network, and the lower their reports of depression.

Based on these findings about the benefits of self-perceived heroism, they developed a "re-storying" intervention, which encouraged people to see their lives through the lens of the Hero's Journey. When people retold their life narrative using these elements, their life felt more meaningful, and they reported more well-being and greater resilience to life's challenges. Further, those who went through the re-storying intervention also viewed obstacles more positively and handled them more creatively (Rogers et al., 2023).

Whether they become heroes, villains, or victims, people can transform their perceptions of their moral character. Although we have presented the idea of moral transformation as a clear transition from one character to another, it is important to note the obvious complexity in how people see themselves (Smith-Loving, 2003). Different kinds of self-perceived character can likely co-exist and compete depending on the context. Indeed, the competition for victimhood is a powerful feature of moral conflicts.

5. Creating and Solving Moral Conflict

Societies around the world are increasingly divided (e.g., Wagner, 2021; Gidron et al., 2020), disagreeing more about politics (i.e., ideological polarization; Dalton, 1987), and disliking each other more (i.e., affective polarization; Iyengar et al., 2012). This polarization is tied to congressional gridlock (Jones, 2001), growing support for partisan violence (Kalmoe & Mason, 2022), distrust of the government (Hosking, 2019), and further agitating

seemingly intractable conflicts (Harel et al., 2020). This polarization is driven by the structure of our political systems (Dalton, 2021) and the media landscape (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021, 2023), but also by our competing moral convictions (Skitka, 2010).

Some have suggested that moral and political conflicts arise because liberals and conservatives have inherently different moral minds (Graham et al., 2009). However, as we have highlighted throughout this chapter, all our moral judgments are both ultimately and psychologically grounded in concerns about victimhood (Schein & Gray, 2018), and moral disagreement can be understood through different concerns about who is vulnerable to victimization (Womick et al., in prep). Here we review how our common concerns about victimhood can both exacerbate and soothe conflict.

5.1 How Victimhood Drives Conflict

Perceptions involving (or lacking) victimhood fuel moral conflicts, including through distorted perceptions of opponents, competitive victimhood, and threat denial.

5.1.1 Perceptions of Opponents

We tend to view moral opponents more as villains than victims. In addition to misunderstanding our opponents' political attitudes (Westfall et al., 2015) and their beliefs about us (Lees & Cikara, 2020; Moore-Berg et al., 2020), we also underestimate their basic morality, believing that they find obviously victimizing acts as permissible. For example, both Democrats and Republicans believe that more than 10% of the other side thinks that child pornography is acceptable (Puyear et al., 2023). Importantly, this "basic morality bias" is wrong, as our opponents condemn obvious immorality (see Figure 10). Of course, we often see our opponents as more stupid than evil (Hartman et al., 2023), but both perceptions of stupidity and immorally drive partisan animosity (Hartman et al., 2022b)
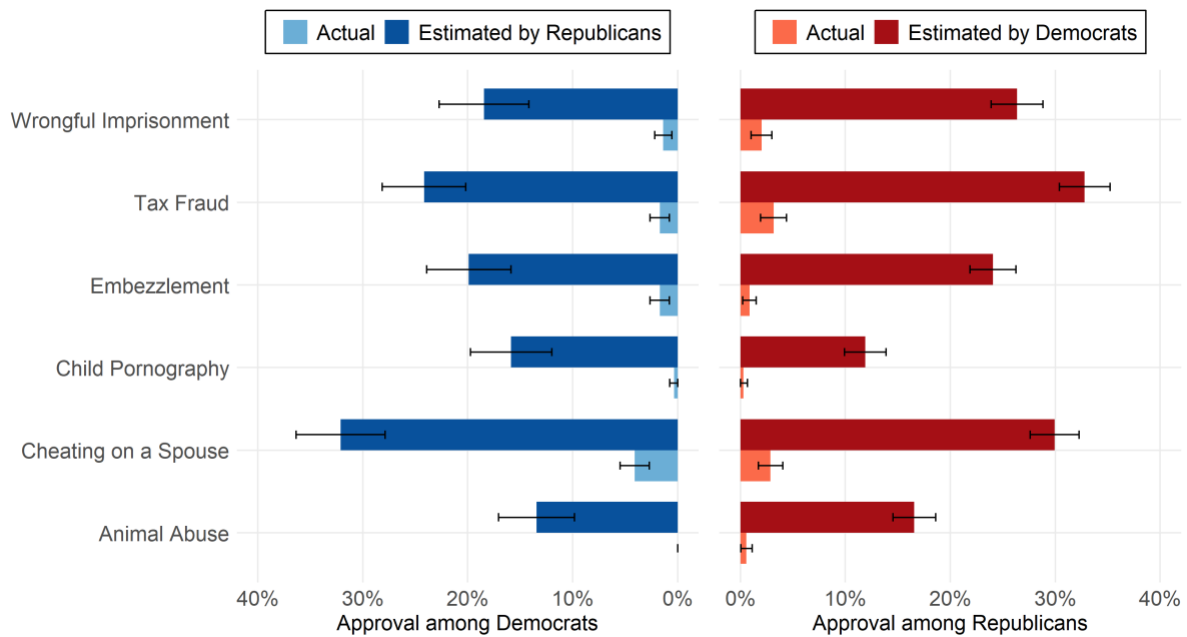
Figure 10. Actual support for basic moral wrongs and support for basic moral wrongs as estimated by political opponents. From Puryear et al. (2023), with permission.

Another demonstration of people seeing the other side as evil is the *partisan trade-off bias* (Goya-Tocchetto et al., 2022). Any policy involves trade-offs between benefits (e.g., expanding medical access, preventing abortion) and costs (e.g., raising taxes, harming women), and when policies are proposed by their side, people see the costs as unintentional and regrettable. On the other hand, when the other side proposes policies, people believe that they intend and celebrate those costs (e.g., thinking that the other side *wants* to raise taxes or harm women).

5.1.2 Competitive Victimhood

In many conflicts, warring factions compete for victimhood. Both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict see themselves as victims both within the current conflict and throughout history. Israelis see themselves as facing generational trauma of persecution and discrimination from being slaves in Egypt to the Holocaust and now facing many Arab nations unwilling to recognize the state of Israel, violent attacks aimed at Israel, and anti-Semitism. Palestinians on the other hand feel victimized through a history of occupation and

expulsion from their land dating back to the Crusades. This victimhood is also exemplified by massacres in Palestinian villages during the development of the Israeli state, and millions maintaining refugee status up to this day. These feelings of victimhood between Israelis and Palestinians often compete against one another, driving both sides further into conflict (Vollhardt, 2009).

Competitive victimhood drives polarization and animosity by enhancing ingroup identification and simultaneously reducing outgroup trust and empathy (for a review, see Young & Sullivan, 2016). Competitive victimhood is also associated with extremist ideologies (Oaten, 2014), silencing disadvantages groups (Danbold et al., 2022), a desire for power (Kahalon et al., 2018), and reduced empathy and trust towards others (Voca et al., 2022).

Competitive victimhood is increased when groups feel blamed by others (Sullivan et al., 2012), because claiming victimhood is a good way of escaping blame, as demonstrated by moral typecasting. This explains why high-status groups can engage in *stigma reversal* (Killian, 1985) when they are locked in conflicts with low-status groups. The control and power that comes with having high-status makes it easier to be held responsibility for conflict (e.g., Tetlock et al., 2006), and so high-status group members can try to paint themselves as victims. For example, when White Americans are reminded of their advantaged position in society relative to more marginalized Black Americans, they often highlight personal hardships (Phillips & Lowery, 2015).

Not only does competitive victimhood satisfy the psychological needs of gaining power and improving one's moral image (e.g., Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Shnabel et al., 2023), it also increases group cohesiveness and support from third parties (Noor et al., 2012). Competing for victimhood involves both

claiming victimhood for yourself and denying others' victimization (Jankowitz, 2018). People also deny the threats that the other side cares about.

5.1.3 Threat Denial in Conflict

One reason for rising animosity in moral conflicts is the perception of threat denial, believing that the other side rejects the validity of the threats and harms that you care deeply about. Our own research has shown how meta-perceptions of threat rejection exacerbate conflicts between moral and political opponents. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans who supported social distancing measures (e.g., non-essential businesses should be closed, stay-at-home orders should be in place), believed those who did not support social distancing measures were not concerned with the realistic threat that COVID-19 posed to peoples' lives and livelihoods (Kubin et al., 2022). Importantly, opponents often did care about these threats but were also concerned with other competing forms of harm, including symbolic threats to freedom and autonomy. Perceiving that the other side fails to recognize your potential victimization leads partisans to dehumanize the other side, denying them a full human mind.

A follow-up study revealed the power of threat denial beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. We created a fictitious scenario where people learned about a community embattled in a conflict over whether to ban cultivation of a special type of flower. Participants learned that some in the community wanted to ban flower cultivation after many became ill from asthma attacks during the cultivation season (a realistic threat) whereas others did not want to ban the flower as it would threaten the community's way of life (i.e., many of their traditions and festivals were based around the flower; a symbolic threat). Participants then reported which side of the debate they supported and whether people who disagree with them rejected the threats the participant cared about. We again found that people dehumanized those who seemed to deny the threat of injury and suffering (Kubin et al., 2022).

Perceptions and meta-perceptions surrounding victimhood can be warped by social media, as evidenced by the role of social media in political polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021, 2023). We become outraged by what we see online, and few things drive moral outrage more than victims. This victim-induced outrage often goes viral (e.g., Brady et al., 2019; Crockett, 2017). Some suggest that people express moral outrage online because signaling your moral character to others provides reputational benefits (e.g., Brady & Van Bavel, 2021; Brady et al., 2020), but our recent research demonstrates that people's feelings of outrage are legitimately driven by concerns about threat.

This work examines the phenomenon of moral panics, where people in society rage about a perceived threat. In the past, these panics were relatively rare because they required many media outlets to signal danger about the same threat, for example reporting on the risks of Dungeons & Dragons (Haberman, 2016) or ritualistic satanic abuse (Yuhas, 2021). But today, social media provides the conditions for daily moral panics (e.g., Walsh, 2020). To explain these moral panics on social media, Puryear and colleagues (2022) introduce the Social Amplification Model of Moral Panics, which suggests that social media confronts people with threats (e.g., Democracy is dying!) and then socially amplifies these threats through signals of virality, concrete metrics (e.g., likes, shares) revealing the spread of these threats. These signals of virality induce feelings of threat and danger among social media users, who then panic and express moral outrage to combat these threats. Unfortunately, this moral outrage only makes this threatening content spread faster.

Studies using this framework show that people lash out on social media not for reputational benefits, but because they are fearful of victimization. Scraped data from Twitter finds that virality best predicted moral outrage expression in contexts with greater threats of victimhood. For liberals, who tend to see climate change as a greater threat, virality of climate change content predicted moral outrage. The effect of virality on outrage was smaller

for conservatives, who see climate change as less of a threat. On the other hand, conservatives tend to see immigration as a greater potential threat, and here virality of immigration content predicted moral outrage for them more than liberals (Puryear et al., 2022). These findings highlight the importance of victimhood in social media.

5.2 Victimhood as a Strategy to Bridge Divides

How can we reduce moral and political conflicts? Researchers have examined animosity-reduction strategies such as correcting misconceptions, highlighting commonalities, building dialogue skills, fostering positive contact, and changing public discourse (Hartman et al., 2022b). Many interventions focus on helping people build connections and find commonalities with one another (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Voelkel et al., 2023), making opponents seem less evil (Puryear et al., 2023) and less stupid (Hartman et al., 2023). But how else can we bridge divides?

Victimhood is a powerful force that can both divide us and bring us together. Because of its centrality in moral cognition, victimhood provides a common currency for discussing moral issues. Even just being concerned with suffering can create understanding, with people's pain sensitivity—their capacity for individual victimization—predicting less cross-partisan animosity (Lee & Ma, 2023). Two broad victimhood-based strategies for bridging divides include 1) validating opponents' feelings of victimhood and 2) sharing our experiences of victimhood.

5.2.1 Strategy 1: Validating Opponents' Feelings of Victimhood

We often see our opponents as evil (Puryear et al., 2023) and moral typecasting then leads us to deny their capacity for suffering or victimization (Pappe, 2015). This denial of victimhood then leads opponents to become angry and dehumanize one another (Kubin et al., 2022). However, once you recognize this pernicious denial of victimhood, you can counteract

it by explicitly recognizing and validating concerns about harm. Research finds that simply acknowledging that people feel threatened or victimized can help sooth conflicts.

In one study during the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-social distancers validated the feelings of pro-social distancers by acknowledging that COVID-19 could harm people. Our results indicated that these validations reduced pro-social distancers willingness to condemn and dehumanize their opponents (Kubin et al., 2022). When we validate the victimization our opponents see, we reduce conflict with them.

5.2.2 Strategy 2: Sharing Experiences of Victimhood

Sharing our own experiences of victimhood can also build mutual moral understanding. In a series of 15 studies, Kubin and colleagues (2021) found benefits for sharing harm- or victim-based experiences with opponents. Participants interacted with people who were political opponents on contentious issues like immigration, climate change, and gun policy. To justify their moral positions, these opponents used either facts and data (e.g., an annual report stating that civilians use guns to defend themselves over 989,000 times per year) or harmful experiences (e.g., having used a gun to shoot an intruder and protect their young daughter). Participants found those who used justifications of experiences (versus facts) as more rational, which led to more respect and willingness to interact with them. Sharing personal experiences about victimhood increases perceptions of rationality because, as Darwin (1872) recognized long ago, it is rational for any organism to avoid harm.

Other studies replicated these effects in a variety of contexts and found that it is specifically experiences of victimization that increase perceptions of rationality and feelings of respect. Personal experiences improve cross-partisan attitudes in face-to-face conversations, in news shows on cable television, and in the comment sections of YouTube videos about abortion. In follow-up studies, results indicated that subjective experiences of victimization were seen as truer (i.e., doubted less) than objective facts and data (Kubin et al.,

2021; see Figure 11). It is easy to dismiss statistics as invented, but harder to dismiss

someone's personal experience of victimization, explaining why social movements like

#MeToo leverage personal stories to drive social change.

　　Despite the promise of sharing personal experiences of victimhood to bridge divides,

there are ethical concerns with asking people to share their experiences, especially when they

are traumatic. It can be hard to re-live traumas even in therapeutic settings (Tong et al., 2019),

and sharing them with political opponents may be especially challenging. To address this

challenge, divide-bridging practitioners should build conversation environments with

psychological safety in mind, but ultimately it is up to individuals about whether they choose

to leverage the power of sharing experiences of victimhood.

Figure 11. Theoretical framework for the usefulness of harmful experiences to reduce moral

and political conflict. From Kubin et al. (2021) with permission.

　　Sharing experiences helps to increase respect more than sharing facts, despite

people's assumptions about the power of facts (Kubin et al., 2021). However, facts are still

important for a healthy democracy (Bohman, 2004). Our own work finds that pairing facts

with personal experiences helps to convey crucial objective information while also increasing

respect for opponents (Kubin et al., 2023a). Combining fact and experiences is also effective

for journalists to convey knowledge and build respect for the other side, as they communicate

both stories of victimization and crucial statistics (Kubin et al., 2023a). While few have

considered how media interventions can combat partisan animosity (Kubin & von Sikorski,

2021), this work (Kubin et al., 2023a) highlights how both journalists and social media users

can harness the power of victimhood to bridge divides.

Taken together, these findings show how narratives of victimhood can help us

recognize that our opponents also suffer injustice. This recognition of victimhood can foster

respect, empathy, and tolerance at levels similar to other interventions (Voelkel et al., 2023).

However, there is yet another especially important benefit to sharing your experiences of

victimhood, it can reduce the other sides' willingness to censor you.

5.2.2.1 Sharing Experiences of Victimhood Reduces Censorship

Sharing previous victimization with political opponents helps us bridge divides, and it

also reduces their willingness to censor our ideas. Given recent concerns about silencing

diverse ideas (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2015) and growing concerns over banning and censoring

political opponents (e.g., banning books, cancel culture, etc.), we have investigated how to

reduce censorship. Of course, in some circumstances censorship may help society (e.g.,

reducing hate speech; White & Crandall, 2017), however, allowing others to speak their

beliefs is a foundation of a healthy democracy (Cohen, 2005). Further, evidence suggests

people may endorse censoring not just in the extreme cases when speech could cause

imminent harm, but also when they simply disagree with the ideas (Kubin et al., 2023b). Our

work finds that people are especially likely to censor ideas when they seem harmful and false,

which is especially likely to occur when people think about political opponents' ideas (Kubin

et al., 2023b).

Sharing personal experiences of victimization helps make ideas seem both less harmful and less false, an idea in-line with previous research. First, Moral Typecasting Theory (Gray & Wegner, 2009), as discussed earlier, suggests that when we see others as victims, we see them as less morally agentic and less capable of taking action (e.g., doing harm) in the future. Thus, learning about the harms our opponents have faced in the past, should reduce our beliefs that their *ideas* are harmful today. Additionally, as we saw above, when people learn about the harmful experiences of their opponents, they see their beliefs as truer (i.e., doubted less; Kubin et al., 2021). Thus, learning about victimizing experiences our opponents have faced should make their ideas seem truer today. Therefore, learning about the victimization your opponents have faced should lead you to see their opposing ideas as less harmful and more true, in turn, reducing your willingness to censor them.

To test these ideas, in one study, university students were told that a gun policy opponent wanted to share their views on campus. This person either grounded their views in their personal experiences of victimhood (e.g., being attacked) or simply said they disagreed with the participant on gun policy (i.e., a control condition). As predicted, participants saw the ideas of their policy opponent as truer and less harmful when they shared their stories of victimhood. These reduced perceptions of harm and lies led to a decreased desire to censor this campus speaker (Kubin et al., 2023b). These studies provide another example of the power of victimhood to create respect across divides, further revealing how victimhood can be a force for both division and connection.

6. General Discussion

There are many psychological forces when it comes to morality and politics, but victimhood seems like the most powerful. Perceptions and assumptions of victimhood determine our moral judgments, our self-perceptions, and shape our interactions with other people. Victimhood often divides us but can also unite us. No one wants to suffer, but

victimhood lies at the center of all our moral judgments, and whoever claims the title of "true victim" gains psychological benefits, including avoiding blame.

Our review focused on 5 main areas. We explored *why* victimhood is important, including its evolutionary beginnings in ancient humans, who are more prey than predator. We then explored definitions and understandings of victimhood, including individual, group-based, and moral victimhood. Next, we explored how people judge the victimhood of others, including acts and character, and how disagreements about victimhood and vulnerability drive political debate. Finally, we explored how victimhood drives moral and political conflict, and how it also shows promise for soothing these conflicts.

Perhaps more than any other concept, victimhood is full of paradox. It is weak, accompanied by vulnerability and mistreatment, but it is also strong, providing moral authority and protection. It is undeniable, a key part of our history and society, but it is also frequently denied, as we try to remove it from public discourse. It is objectively true that some people are victimized, but victimhood is more often subjective, a matter of perception that dominates our moral judgments. Victimhood divides us, fueling competition and dehumanization, but it can also unite us, when we share our experiences of harm with others. The richness of victimhood allows for all these paradoxes, and also allows this concept to sit in the middle of both political conflicts and our moral minds.

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