The Effects of Victimization on Reactions to Other Victims

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A study was conducted to investigate the conditions under which the experience of victimization alters one’s responses to other victims. Subjects were led to believe they either had been fairly paid for their work on a task (nonvictims) or had been underpaid (victims). Half the subjects believed that the treatment they had received was based upon personal information they had revealed about themselves (responsible subjects), while the others believed their treatment had nothing to do with them personally (nonresponsible subjects). All subjects were given an opportunity to evaluate, judge similarity to, and pay a second victim who was believed to be either “responsible” or “not responsible” for his plight. The results generally supported the experimental hypotheses. The impact the experience of victimization had on an individual’s responses to another victim depended upon the individual’s perception of his own state. The directionality of such altered responses was determined by the individual’s perception of the other’s state.

There are two widespread but contradictory beliefs about the effects of victimization upon the victim. One view suggests that the experience of victimization results in an enhanced sensitivity to the injustices suffered by others, and to a heightened compassion for other victims; presumably this happens because one’s own victimization facilitates identification with another victim. Alternatively, the experience of victimization is said to lead to reduced

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sympathy for other victims; presumably this happens because one’s own victimization creates a need to dissociate oneself from another victim and/or to identify with the aggressor. The former position would suggest, for example, that victims of prejudice would themselves be less prejudiced toward memers of other oppressed groups than would nonvictims. The latter view suggests the opposite.

It seems plausible that each type of reaction occurs under different conditions. Until recently, for example, unequal (victim) status was accepted with apparent equanimity, often resulting in self-hatred among many women, blacks, and hispanics individuals, all of whom may be viewed as members of “oppressed” or victimized groups. The emergence of cohesive self-help organizations within these subgroups appeared to be linked to the newly accepted belief that the victimized status was undeserved and did not reflect negatively upon group members. Thus, it would appear that one factor affecting a victim’s reactions to and behavior toward other victims is his perception of his own status as negative or positive.

A similar line of reasoning about victims’ negative responses to their victimized peers may be found in discussions of the effects of self-hatred (Lewin, 1948) and stigmatization (Goffman, 1963) upon the individual. These authors suggest that when being victimized leads to unfavorable self-regard, its frequent consequence is rejection not only of oneself, but also of similar others. There is some empirical support related to these notions. In an early study, Clark and Clark (1947) found that black children, when presented with both black and white dolls, rejected the black dolls and judged the white dolls as superior along several dimensions. Presumably, the black child’s negative racial self-image motivated this response. Similarly, Goldberg (1968) found that college women evaluated scholarly articles as far superior when they were believed to be written by a male rather than a female author. In each study, it was inferred, but not directly tested, that negative self-regard along the relevant dimension (race and sex, respectively) mediated subjects’ rejection of the similar other. Results of a recent study by Moriarity (1974) provide additional support for this idea. Minority group members were found to react more unfavorably to their fellows when they had been derogated for their “deviant” behavior than when they had not. Thus, only when subjects were made to feel uneasy about themselves did they exhibit less positive sentiment toward similar others.

However, the reductions in self-esteem produced by victimization also may result in positive responses and identification with another victim. If another victim is not viewed in a negative way because of his victimization, favorable evaluations and identification with him may help reduce one’s own negative self-image. In this situation, positive responses to another victim serve to increase feelings of self-worth by denying the negative connotation of one’s own victimization.

When, however, does victimization result in negative self-regard? It seems likely that this occurs only when the individual believes his victimization is related to his own personal characteristics or behavior and is not based merely on chance or arbitrary events. Thus, those victims who feel in some way responsible for their fates are more apt to have negative feelings about themselves than those who feel in no way responsible. Following this reasoning, responsibility should also be important in determining whether a similarly victimized other is rejected or accepted. Once a victim’s self-regard is lowered, his primary objective is to remove himself from his perceived negative attribute or to deny its existence. Thus, he will reject other victims who apparently are also personally responsible for their plights, because their negative attributes imply by responsibility confirm his lowered self-regard. Conversely, he will ally himself with other victims who apparently are not personally responsible for their plights, because their seeming “innocence” relieves or at least throws into question his lowered self-regard. In both situations, bad feelings about self are minimized.

Some relevant evidence may be found in the differing results of two studies conducted by Simmons and Learner (1968). The authors found that when the experimental situation suggested that a victimized partner was responsible for his own plight, the similarly victimized subjects worked less hard for him than they worked for a subject who had not been victimized. In a second study, however, subjects were prevented from attributing responsibility to their victimized partner, and the effect was reversed. While these results were interpreted in terms of the authors’ “just world” theory, in that subjects were seen as motivated by a desire to restore justice to the deserving victim, an alternative explanation suggests that subjects were motivated by the desire to dissociate themselves from the victim who was viewed as responsible and to ally themselves with the victim who was not viewed as responsible for his plight.

In the present study, subjects were either greatly underpaid for their work on a task (victims), or were fairly paid (nonvictims). Half of these subjects were led to believe that the treatment they had received was based upon information they had revealed about their personal values (responsible subjects); the other half were led to believe that their treatment had nothing whatsoever to do with them personally, and was instead only a chance occurrence (nonresponsible subjects). Subjects were then given an opportunity to react to another victim who was presented as either having been mistreated on the basis of personal information (responsible other), or as having been victimized by chance (nonresponsible other). Subjects’ reactions to this victim were measured in several ways: Similarity judgments, affective and evaluative responses, and subjects’ decisions about how much the other she should be paid all were obtained.
It was expected that victims who felt responsible for their plights would react differently to other victims than would nonvictims, because in this case victimization would result in lowered self-regard. Specifically, three hypotheses were proposed: (1) Greater difference in responses to responsible and not responsible victims would occur among subjects who felt responsible for their own victimization than among subjects who were not victimized at all. Furthermore, subjects who felt responsible for their own victimization as compared to subjects not victimized at all would (2) respond less favorably to responsible others and (3) respond more favorably toward nonresponsible others. Victims who felt in no way responsible for their plights were expected to respond no differently to other victims than would nonvictims. The manipulation of responsibility was not expected to have any effect on nonvictims.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 96 male students, ages 17 to 19, from a New York City high school. They were exposed to the experimental situation in three group sessions, with groups ranging from 30 to 34 subjects randomly assigned to each of the 8 experimental conditions. No interaction occurred between subjects.

Procedure

At the start of the session, subjects learned that they would be participating in a study of industrial work relationships involving four tasks, and that they would complete the first two tasks that day and the remainder during the following week. Subjects were led to believe that another group of boys was also participating in the study at the same time, but in different classrooms. Each of them would be working in pairs with a peer from one of these other rooms throughout the study, and for each of the four tasks they would be matched with a different pairmate. Subjects were never to meet their pairmates, and all identification was to be done by a series of code numbers.

It was explained that for each task, each member of the work pair would be doing a different job. During two of the tasks, each participant would be a "producer," and during the other two he would be a "tabulator." These titles were actually meaningless, and merely served to create an apparent distinction between subjects and their pairmates. All subjects were then told that for the first task they would be producers, and their pairmates, tabulators. Before beginning the first task, subjects completed a Personal Information Form (PIF). This form was introduced to enhance the responsibility manipulation.

Task I involved filling out a Reading Habits Questionnaire containing routine questions about students' reading habits. When they finished the questionnaire, the experimenter informed them that their earnings for the first task has been determined by their pairmates, who would all receive a dollar for their work, regardless of what they paid the subjects. Their pairmates could pay them between $0.00 to $1.50, but, subjects learned, their pairmates had been told that a dollar is the usual pay rate. Each subject received a payment slip apparently completed by his pairmate. Questionnaire I, containing several manipulation checks, was then completed.

During the second task, subjects became tabulators and learned that they had been randomly paired with a producer from another research room. As tabulators, subjects would be paid a dollar for their work, and would decide how much of their new pairmates should be paid for completing a "study habits" questionnaire. The experimenter then gave subjects information apparently supplied by their new pairmates, informing them that their pairmates had all been greatly underpaid during Task I. Thus, all subjects were paired with a victim during Task II.

The major dependent measures were obtained at this point. Finally, subjects were debriefed.

Design

The experimental design was a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial: responsible and not responsible subjects who were or were not victimized responded to a responsible or not responsible victim pairmate.

Manipulations

Responsibility of subject. Critical to the responsibility manipulation was the PIF, a short questionnaire designed to elicit information about subjects' values.

The information subjects revealed about themselves was intended to be personal, and likely to lead subjects to feel that they had revealed something negative about themselves. The form contained four forced choice items. Subjects were asked to select "which of the two people described you would rather be if you had to choose." These items were: (a) a happy fool vs. an unhappy genius; (b) a dead hero vs. a live coward; (c) steal and be rich vs. be honest and poor; and (d) be smart and ugly vs. stupid and good looking.
To manipulate personal responsibility, half the subjects learned that their
paimates would be receiving the subjects' completed PIF prior to making their
payment decision, while the other half were informed that their paimates would
know nothing about them when making their payment decisions. Because of the
nature of the information revealed on the PIF, subjects whose paimates were to
receive it were considered to be "responsible" subjects (i.e., responsible for the
paimate's payment decision). Those whose paimates would not receive it were
considered "not responsible" subjects (i.e., not responsible for the paimate's
payment decision). No subject had any idea that the PIF would be used in this
manner until after the end of Task I.

Victimization of subjects As their payment for Task I, subjects received a
sheet informing them of their paimate's decision to pay them either $1.00,
which had been established as the usual pay rate (nonvictims), or 10¢ (victims).

Recipient's responsibility. A similar procedure was employed to manipulate
the responsibility of subjects' second (victimized) paimate. Subjects learned
through a sheet ostensibly completed by their paimate whether or not their
PIFs had been distributed to their prior paimates before they were (under)paid
10¢. If it had, recipients were considered responsible victims, and if not, they
were considered nonresponsive victims.

Dependent Measures

The four dependent measures were: (a) subjects' ratings of their paimates
on a series of nine-point bipolar adjective scales; (b) subjects' judgments of
similarity between themselves and their paimates; (c) subjects' ratings of
attraction to their paimates; and (d) subjects' decisions about how much to
pay their Task II paimates.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

Responses to questionnaire items indicated that experimental inductions of
victimization and responsibility of self and other had their intended effect. All
subjects accurately recalled their earnings on the first task and (with three
exceptions) victims indicated that they felt underpaid, while nonvictims felt
they were fairly paid. Subjects also were responsive to manipulations of
perceived responsibility: Responsible subjects unanimously reported that
paimates had received their PIF prior to paying them, and nonresponsible
subjects unanimously reported that paimates had not received it. Analyses of
variance of ratings of perceived responsibility for victimization on two
nine-point bipolar scales provided additional information: Responsible as
compared to nonresponsible subjects (a) judged the PIF to have strongly
affected their paimate's pay decision ($F = 46.788, df = 1.88, p < .001$) and
(b) felt that their paimate's pay decision was largely based on their personal
characteristics ($F = 23.11, df = 1.88, p < .001$). No other significant effects
were revealed in these analyses.

Data from the second questionnaire demonstrated that subjects also
accurately responded to manipulations of the recipient's victimization and
responsibility. All subjects reported that recipient's prior earnings were 10¢
and characterized recipients as having been underpaid, rather than fairly or
overpaid. Lastly, all but four subjects (each in a different experimental
condition) correctly indicated whether or not the recipient's earlier paimate
had received his PIF prior to the pay decision.

Dependent Measures

In order to test the three experimental hypotheses, all of which involved
individual cell comparisons, six planned comparisons among treatment means
were constructed. An analysis of variance was conducted and the $F$ statistics
for the planned comparisons computed. Means of subjects' responses on each
of the dependent measures are shown in Table 1. A summary of the statistics
from the comparisons appears in Table 2. As expected, responsible and
nonresponsible nonvictims' responses did not differ on any of the dependent
measures. Consequently their data were pooled in all subsequent analyses.

Evaluation. Most directly revealing of subjects' rejecting or accepting
attitudes toward their victimized peers were their evaluative ratings. These
ratings were done on ten nine-point bipolar scales. Factor analyses of responses
on these scales were conducted and evaluation emerged as the predominant
factor, accounting for 57% of the total variance. Subjects' weighted factor
scores were taken as the unit of analysis.

The results confirmed each of our three hypotheses. First, victims who felt
responsible for their plights were more attentive to the conditions surrounding
another's victimization than were subjects who were not victimized: Responsible victims were found to rate the responsible and not responsible

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4 Analyses of variance of attitude ratings and $\chi^2$ tests on payment decisions were conducted to determine whether responses to the four items included in the PIF affected any subsequent behaviors. No statistically significant findings emerged from the analyses.

5 All $t$ values were less than 1.21.

6 The factor loadings of each of the scales for the evaluation factor were (from greatest to least): Incongratulate-Incongratulate (0.7040); hostile-friendly (0.6371); snobbish-not snobbish (0.6038); bad-good (0.5584); selfish-unselfish (0.5161); foolish-wise (0.4115); powerless-powerful (0.1366); passive-aggressive (0.1161); submissive-dominate (0.0809); and weak-strong (0.0685). An additional factor, potency, accounted for another 16% of the total variance. No significant differences emerged when the factor scores were analyzed.
TABLE 1
MEANS OF SUBJECTS' REACTIONS TO THE VICTIMIZED OTHER (RECIPIENT) BY EXPERIMENTAL CONDITION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Victims</td>
<td>Nonvictims</td>
<td>Victims</td>
<td>Nonvictims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Responsible</td>
<td>Not responsible</td>
<td>Responsible</td>
<td>Not responsible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible</td>
<td>Evaluation factor scores</td>
<td>5.466</td>
<td>4.588</td>
<td>4.301</td>
<td>4.462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not responsible</td>
<td>Perceived similarity ratings</td>
<td>3.026</td>
<td>4.261</td>
<td>4.704</td>
<td>4.279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible</td>
<td>Attraction ratings</td>
<td>5.083</td>
<td>4.750</td>
<td>5.167</td>
<td>4.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not responsible</td>
<td>Payment decisions</td>
<td>3.583</td>
<td>4.333</td>
<td>5.083</td>
<td>4.818</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible</td>
<td>$ .57</td>
<td>$ .82</td>
<td>$1.08</td>
<td>$1.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not responsible</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. - n = 12 in each experimental condition.
*a* All entries but the "payment decisions" are means of ratings done on nine-point scales. The higher the mean, the less favorable the rating.
*b* The range of possible payment was from $0.00 to $1.50.

Eventmates significantly differently than did nonvictims (p < .01). This difference was not apparent when ratings by nonresponsible victims and nonvictims were compared. Secondly, responsible victims evaluated the responsible eventmate more negatively than did the nonvictims (p < .05), while there was no significant difference between the ratings of responsible eventmates in the nonresponsible victim and nonvictim conditions. Lastly, the responsible victims produced far more positive ratings of the nonresponsible eventmate than did the nonvictims (p < .01). No differences emerged when comparing ratings of nonresponsible victims and nonvictims.

**Similarity.** Ratings of perceived similarity were obtained in response to the question "How similar or dissimilar do you think you are to your Task II eventmate?" Results indicated that, as predicted, responsible victims responded to the two eventmates more differently than did nonvictims (p < .01). As also predicted, this discrepancy did not occur among not responsible victims: The...
differences in their ratings of responsible and not responsible pairmates did not significantly differ from the difference demonstrated in the ratings of nonvictims. Contrary to our expectations, responsible victims did not rate themselves as less similar to their responsible pairmates than did nonvictims. However, there was evidence that responsible victims rated themselves as distinctly more similar to the not responsible pairmate than did the nonvictims ($p < .05$). No such difference was apparent in the ratings of not responsible victims and the nonvictims.

**Attraction.** Subjects were asked “How much do you think you would like or dislike your pairmate?” The results supported the first hypothesis: The discrepancy between liking ratings of the responsible and not responsible others was significantly greater in responsible victims conditions than in nonvictim conditions ($p < .05$). As also was expected, no differences were found in the range of liking responses exhibited by nonresponsible victims and nonvictims. However, there was less support for the other two hypotheses. There was no evidence indicating that responsible victims responded more unfavorably to the responsible other nor more favorably to the nonresponsible other than did the nonvictims.

**Payment decisions.** Subjects were asked to determine how much money (between 0 and $1.50) their victimized pairmates should receive for work on the second test. Results indicated that when compared to nonvictims, there were no significant differences in the amount of money paid either by responsible or by not responsible victims to their pairmates (see Tables 1 and 2). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported by this data. Further, there was no indication that responsible victims paid nonresponsible pairmates significantly differently than did nonvictims. There were, however, distinct differences in the amount of money paid to responsible pairmates: Both responsible ($p < .10$) and not responsible ($p < .05$) victims paid them significantly less than did nonvictims. Thus, none of the hypotheses was supported by the payment data, although clear-cut evidence emerged that all victims behaved more punitively toward responsible pairmates than did nonvictims.

**Discussion**

It was proposed that victims respond differently than do nonvictims when confronted with another victim only when the victim feels negatively about himself because of his victimization. Our results generally confirm this proposition. On their evaluative judgments and on ratings of both similarity and attraction, victims behaved differently than nonvictims only when the victims believed that they had contributed to their own victimization. Victims who clearly could not have been responsible for their unpleasant fates reacted not differently than did nonvictims.

It was predicted that a self-derogating victim would accept or reject another victim as a function of the circumstances surrounding the other’s victimization. In fact, responsible victims did make fine discriminations in their responses to other victims. More specifically, when compared to nonvictims, greater acceptance generally characterized their responses to those not responsible for their victimization, while, at least in the case of evaluations, less acceptance characterized their responses to those responsible for their victimization. Thus, each of the apparently contradictory reactions of victims to other victims were evidenced in this study.

These data attest to the complexity and variability of one victim’s reactions to another. Furthermore, they lend support to the notion that the desire to alleviate negative feelings about oneself is the motivational dynamics underlying the various reactions. For, where self-regard was in no way affected, victimization had virtually no effect on an individual’s attitudes and feelings about another victim. When, however, victimization did have negative implications for self-regard, victims showed increased sensitivity to the circumstances surrounding the other’s predicament. When the other victim was perceived to share one’s unfavorable attributes (implied by responsibility), rejection occurred; when the other victim was not perceived to share one’s unfavorable attributes, positive reactions occurred. These results conform to the idea that when victimization results in self-deprecation, reactions to another victim are motivated by efforts to alleviate these negative feelings.

Empirical support for the notion that the unique evaluative reactions of responsible victims were caused by a need to enhance self-regard may be found in the similarity judgment data. When making similarity ratings, responsible victims described themselves as more similar to the actually different not responsible other than to the truly similar responsible other. This distortion of reality suggests that denial of the negative attributes implied by having contributed to one’s unfortunate circumstances occurred, indicating that subjects were indeed concerned with their negative feelings about themselves. These data provide dramatic evidence of the consequences of self-deprecation on reactions to other victims, and closely parallel the processes of dissociation and identification discussed by Lewin (1948), Goffman (1963), and others.

Payment decisions followed a different pattern from that of the attitudinal data. Subjects’ decisions about the other’s outcomes did not appear to be mediated by feelings about themselves, for the behavior of responsible and not responsible victims was virtually identical. These findings suggest that behavior toward a victimized other is guided by different considerations than are attitudinal responses to him. While this clearly is a possibility, it should be remembered that in this study decisions about how much money to pay another required virtually no interaction with him, and thus the issues of
rejection and acceptance were probably not particularly salient. To determine whether victims' behavioral responses to their peers do parallel the attitudinal pattern observed in this study, more direct measures of their actions toward other victims must be obtained. Perhaps, for example, if victimized subjects had, or expected to have, face-to-face contact with their victimized peer, their behavior would prove to be more consistent with their attitudes. Clearly, the practical implications of the present findings would be enhanced by such results.

These findings present a paradox with apparent social implications. When lowered self-regard results from victimization (here, because of feeling responsible for one's plight), rejection of similarly victimized others will occur. These data suggest that a major focus of self-help organizations should be on exploring the members' feelings about themselves and on redefining these conceptions. Thus the "Black is beautiful" movement and the "consciousness raising" activities of women may be viewed not as new social phenomena but rather as necessary preconditions to group cohesiveness and the development of support systems within the victimized group.

A question with practical significance concerns the generalizability of the obtained results. In the present study, subjects were exposed to a victim who had experienced precisely the same situation as they had. Would our victim have felt any kinship with a war refugee? Is there a unidimensional state of victimization which creates an intergroup bond among many types of victims, or are differences between victim groups likely to inhibit between-group cooperation and aid? In order to address these issues, different dimensions of similarity between subject and victim should be systematically varied in future research.

In summary, these data support the proposition that the experience of victimization has an impact on one's responses to another victim only when the individual's self-image is affected by his plight. How the other's plight is perceived then determines whether the reaction is a negative or positive one. The dimension of personal responsibility clearly is not the single variable producing negative self-regard and/or negative views of other victims, but rather is suggestive of a larger group of factors.

REFERENCES