

Words Matter: Victim vs Target

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We all believe that words matter, but is there bias in research focused on abusive behavior? The discussion presented here is an assessment of the consequences of naming and labeling (classification) those affected by abusive actions (uncivil and bullying behaviors) in the workplace. Victimization is socially constructed through labeling and not reality, and we discuss the underpinnings of the use of the word, victim. Victim precipitation is a theory from criminology used within aggression research. This theory proposes that the victim, at least in part, contributes to their own misfortunes. It has gained some traction in management and educational research as a reason bullies target individuals with abusive behaviors. Perceptions of others and stigma matter, both in research and in the workplace. Researchers should avoid using victimization theory when exploring abusive workplace behaviors. Managers should use target when investigating abusive workplace behaviors.

We all believe that words matter. Most research on abusive workplace behavior uses victim participation theory as a framework. However, Cortina et al. (2018)(2018) believe that the theory has “logical inadequacies, questionable evidence, unfounded assumptions, untestable hypotheses, and unwarranted generalizations” (p.84). Victimization theory has been debunked in other areas; unnecessary cataloging and sigma result from using this theory in research and in the workplace (Cortina et al., 2018).

Labels are social constructions made by individuals and groups; they are not reality (Bowker & Star, 2000). The study of classification and labeling is important because it is how we view and make sense of the world using classifications and labeling (Bowker & Star, 2000). There are specific reasons behind individual classification schema, which often include our biases, resulting in unanticipated consequences. Inappropriate labels (classifications) can lessen competence and self-esteem, create alienation, and negatively affect an individual’s life (Hobbs, 1975). Therefore, we suggest the reasons that targets of an abusive actor labelled as ‘victim’ or ‘target’ are important to the target, bystanders, bullies, and outcomes.

Research continues on abusive workplace behaviors, which are behaviors that impede the work within a workgroup, department, or organization. Incivility, rudeness, sexual harassment, harassment, and bullying are part of this research. However, there are still issues concerning terminology, to which we seek to add clarity by examining the question: Is there bias in research focused on abusive behavior? This paper uses the victimization theory and ideas of labelling to explore the connotations of the word “victim” and some impacts of using the victimization theory and labelling in research and the workplace.

Overview of Victimization Theory

The word “victim” has meanings rooted in history. To determine why some were victims of crime and other misfortunes, von Hentig (1948) opined that victims contribute to being targeted for misfortune by wishes, attitudes, and personalities, a belief restated by others such as Glaser (1970), Nagel (1963), and Silverman (1974). Much of this research is in criminology; however, this thought has come to be a basic belief in some parts of US culture as a theory of victimization and victim precipitation. For example, “a common fallacy is that some women ‘ask for’ harassment with inappropriate attire or language on the job, so they are partly to blame for the wrongdoing that ensues” (Lonsway et al., 2008 in Cortina et al., 2018, p.86). The concept of victim leads to the individual being blamed for his or her misfortunes. Amir (1971), studying criminal acts, went as far as stating that, “in a way, the victim is always the cause of the crime.” By this, Amir meant that the offender interpreted the victim as ‘asking for it.’ These thoughts persist in various cultures, including the US, despite evidence to the contrary (Bieneck & Krahe, 2011).

Studies dealing with abusive school and workplace behaviors use the victimization theory. Eigenberg and Garland (2008) indicated that the persistence of the theory is partly because “[i]ndividual level explanations are very popular in the United States” (p. 33). It allows individuals to ignore such exacerbating issues as poverty and ingrained social, workplace, and political structures. It denotes a failure to recognize social and cultural realities (Elias, 1986)(Elias, 1986). Eigenberg and Garland (2008) also put the theory within the realm of the just world view where, because the world tends toward justice, you get what you deserve in life (Lerner, 1980)(Lerner, 1980).

Using this view, multiple studies found that victims often cause their own problems because they are low in self-esteem, socially inept, cautious, sensitive, quiet, anxious, depressed, and insecure (Craig, 1998; Olweus, 1995; Rigby & Slee, 1991)(Craig, 1998; Olweus, 1995; Rigby & Slee, 1991). Some of this work has been in education and some within the workplace, as bullies grow up and go to work (Magnuson & Norem, 2009)(Magnuson & Norem, 2009), making much of the educational work transferable to the workplace. Some interpretations suggest that the same must be true of victims and their participation in their various misfortunes. Research in organization and management publications continue to use the word, victim, and the victim participation theory, even though other social sciences reject it, including criminology (Cortina et al., 2018). Even prominent researchers, such as Aquino (2000)(2000), consider the victim participation theory to be well developed, but fail to mention any of the abundant criticisms.

Cortina et al. (2018)(2018) stated that, “[a]fter reviewing the long and troubled history of the victim precipitation hypothesis, we struggle to find its appeal. This model simply has too many flaws and inflicts too much harm” (p.89). Among those who debunked this idea in criminology are Timmer and Norman (1984)(1984), who stated that “wherever victim precipitation is offered as an explanation, it serves to place responsibility on the victim: you cause, or help to cause, your own victimization” (p. 65). When looking through research on abusive behavior, the victim is usually someone that others consider different, even if the difference is slight or imagined. Moriarty (2008)(2008) stated that the historical view is that the difference made them victims, so if they become part of the non-victim group by discarding their differences, they will not be victims any longer. Of course, this ignores the fact that one might not be able to change their so-called ‘difference.’ In addition, someone may be a target who does not want to go along with the crowd but is not different in any substantial way. Research does not include those who (a) do not know that they are targets or (b) ignore the abusive behavior.

Calling someone a victim of abusive workplace behaviors has consequences that affect both the individual and the organization, including turnover, health concerns, productivity loss, and legal costs (Hassard et al., 2018; Kline & Lewis, 2019; Shaw et al., 2018). It allows the abusive actor to excuse his or her behaviors and creates a sense that the victim is to blame (Cortina et al., 2018). Therefore, this definitional issue concerns managers interested in stopping these behaviors. Even recent articles on bullying use the term “victim” to describe those who are recipients of hostile acts in the workplace, for example, in Einarsen, et al. (2020)(2020), Mackey, et al. (2018) (2018), and Obeidat, et al. (2018)(2018).

Labeling

Labeling, or classification, allows sorting of information about items or people so that the label can be recognized as part of a pattern. Bliss (1929, p. 142)(1929, p.

142) discussed classification as relating things that are alike, “... according to some principle or conception, purpose, or interest...” Labeling is based on attributes of the item or person (Woo, 1994)(Woo, 1994). Each individual creates a classification and decides the name and what fits in it (Bowker & Star, 2000)(Bowker & Star, 2000). Becker’s (1982)(1982) labeling theory suggested that these classifications represent the biases and moral choices of the individual and their culture in making those decisions.

Labels can create stigma. Bowker and Star (2000) (2000) used the example of the South African experiences regarding apartheid, which is an extreme example, but illustrates the way labeling and classification can determine points of view and silence any that might disagree. Labeling may encourage some behaviors and discourage others (Cialdini, 2007; Duggan, 2017)Invalid source specified., and Cialdini (2007)(2007) argued that naming and labeling helps others determine how they should behave toward the person or item being classified, that is, it indicates to bystanders what the appropriate response should be in a particular group or society (Blackwell et al., 2017). How a bystander or manager views the target determines his or her reactions to abusive behavior. The dominant social group interprets the meanings of those labels and enforces the norms that perpetuate the label’s power. Names and labels may reinforce the dominant social group and exclude outsiders. Bowker and Star (2000)(2000), in discussing Becker’s (1982)(1982) labeling theory, suggested that labels can make the labeled person see themselves as deviant or outside the social group, either from deliberate actions or unanticipated consequences. Labels oppress others, particularly those seen as different in any way that the abuser or labeler wishes to classify the difference (Blackwell et al., 2017).

Classifications and labels make sense of the world. However, Bowker and Star (2000)(2000) gave multiple examples of labeling creating negative effects. When applied to individuals, labels create altered perceptions of the person, which in turn, may impact outcomes (Link & Phelan, 2013)(Link & Phelan, 2013). Intended outcomes are often positive, but unintended outcomes are often negative (Link et al., 1989). Victim, as discussed above, has a different connotation than does target. When labelling targets of abusive behavior as victims, it either invalidates or confirms these experiences (Blackwell et al., 2017). “Victim” is a stigma that means that the target either contributed in some way to their own victimization or they have a victim personality, that is, they are low in self-esteem, socially inept, cautious, sensitive, quiet, anxious, depressed, and insecure (Craig, 1998; Olweus, 1995; Rigby & Slee, 1991)(Craig, 1998; Olweus, 1995; Rigby & Slee, 1991).

Blackwell, et al. (2017)(2017) found that invalidating language means that the time and effort to report the abusive behavior is useless. They also found that labeling the behavior as abusive allowed bystanders to understand the impact of the behavior. Therefore, using the words “victim” or “victim personality” may signal to man-

agers that abusive behavior can be excused. It also says the same to other targets.

Bowker and Star (2000)(2000) stated that people may not be aware of the moral order created by their labels until there is a problem or disagreement. The labelers are often unaware of the social norms, stigma, and unanticipated consequences created by these classifications. Weeks (1999)(1999) used the example of “homosexuality” to explain how labels may allow persistence of norms that create the idea of deviancy. Because of the history of the word, “victim,” the individual may be considered as deviant or pitiful or both.

Discussion

In looking through the research in abuse, violence, and other similar abusive behaviors, target does not seem to have the same meaning or history as does victim. It seems that the word, target, would be a more accurate description of those who receive such behaviors. It would also serve to alleviate any potential bias on the part of managers and researchers. In some recent articles, there has been a shift toward the use of the word, target, in writing on abusive workplace behaviors, notable in international journals, for example, Nielsen, et al. (2020)(2020), Pauli, et al. (2020)(2020), and Salin and Notelaers (2020)(2020). In Zuberi et al.’s (2015)(2015) discussion of race classifications, they argue that race is a social construction and not a genetic reality. In the same vein, we argue that victimization is a social construction leading to classifications, and not reality. Naming and labeling are important, as they are social constructions with consequences. The word, target, has much less baggage, as far as the history of the word and does not imply that the person has done anything to cause the behaviors directed at him/her.

Suggestions for Future research

Cortina et al.’s (2018)(2018) search of the literature indicated that the popularity of the victim participation theory is on the rise in various organizational and management publications. The theory came under attack in the late 1990s in criminology because of its “logical inadequacies, questionable evidence, unfounded assumptions, untestable hypotheses, and unwarranted generalizations” and is no longer used in the same manner in most social sciences (Cortina et al., 2018, p. 84). Among the five top political science journals, only one mention is made by Bateson (2012)(2012), and that is to support its criticism. So why do organizational and management researchers still use the word, victim, to refer to the target of an abusive workplace actor (bully)?

Future research should dismiss the debunked idea of victim and victimization theory and focus on the prevention of abusive behaviors. Bullies grow up and enter the workforce (Magnuson & Norem, 2009)(Magnuson & Norem, 2009), including academia, and much more work needs to focus on stopping it early and preventing abusive behavior at schools and in the workplace. It would be a more fruitful use of time and activity.

Implications for Practice

Most managers consider targets of abusive behavior to be victims, that is, “consciously or unconsciously participating in the sequence of events that leads to their becoming targets” (Aquino & Byron, 2002, p. 72)(Aquino & Byron, 2002, p. 72). Both Becker’s (1982)(1982) labeling theory of deviant behavior and Bowker and Star’s (2000) (2000) classification theory show that labels can influence experience as well as behaviors of bystanders and managers. Use of the word, victim, can marginalize those who experience abusive behaviors by creating stigma. We recommend these changes for various documents, including policies and procedures, as well as in management and employee training.

We examined the impact of terminology in the workplace, with the historical and societal meanings attached to the word “victim.” Therefore, we suggest that target would be the most appropriate word for managers to use. Using target instead of victim will allow managers to address any abusive behavior, whether the target complains. This will stop behaviors that might create unwanted turnover or stress on targets, as well as on bystander employees and customers.

Managers’ moral and legal responsibilities for abusive behaviors have become more stringent, rather than less. Use of the word “target” should allow managers to take necessary steps to prevent loss of productivity, illness, and legal action on the part of targets and bystanders. Table 1 outlines different perspectives that using “target” and “victim” can have in the workplace.

Table 1

Consequences of Word Choice

Positive word choice: Target	Negative word choice: Victim
Increases competence	Lessens competence
Increases self-esteem	Lessens self-esteem
Creates sense of belonging	Creates alienation
Encourages personal growth	Diminishes person
Improves retention	Creates likelihood of turnover
Helps create healthy responses to stress	Increases health problems/stress
Improves productivity	Leads to lost productivity

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