2012

Victim-Blaming: A New Term for an Old Trend

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Victim-blaming is a phenomenon that has been happening since at least the beginning of recorded history but has only recently been identified as a dynamic used to empower the criminal and maintain the status quo. Victim-blaming is perpetuated by sexism, the Just World Theory, cognitive biases, and the theories of self-blame. Victim-blaming occurs when the victim of a crime or abuse is held partly or entirely responsible for the actions committed against them. In other words, the victims are held accountable for the maltreatment they have been subjected to. Perpetrators of crimes for which they blame the victim commonly enjoy a privileged social status opposite the victim, and their blame typically involves use of stereotypical negative words. The phenomenon of victim blaming is thus common in hate crimes, discrimination, rape and bullying. The main motivation for people to victim-blame is to justify abuse or social injustice. However, it is not only the perpetrator who engages in the victim-blaming. Perpetrators, bystanders and society and even the victims themselves practice and enforce victim-blaming. Each group of people who blames the victim does so for different reasons based on their power or lack thereof, self-defense and desire to find logical reasons for abuse or social injustice.

William Ryan coined the phrase "blaming the victim" in his book *Blaming the Victim* in 1971, as a response to years of oppression and the civil rights movement. He describes victim-blaming as a way to preserve the interest of the privileged group in power (Zur). Since then, advocates for crime victims, particularly those of rape, have adopted the phrase. Although Ryan coined the phrase, the phenomenon is well developed in psychology and history. As previously stated, victim-blaming has been happening at least since the beginning of recorded history. There are many examples of victim-blaming in the Old Testament regarding tragedies justified by blaming the victims as sinners (Robinson 141). Unfortunately, victim-blaming is still rampant today and has only recently been identified as problematic.

Perpetrators blame their victims to justify their actions in order to avoid punishment and maintain freedom to abuse in the future. A perpetrator's justification for their actions and continued abuse appears to stem from a sense of entitlement and their desire to have power over others. One example of this behavior occurs when people try to justify racism against black people in the United States. Ryan wrote of this phenomenon in his book *Blaming the Victim* also as a response to Daniel Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), which rationalizes the underprivileged status of black people as their fault (Kirkpatrick 219). While this false belief was already well known in society, it has been heavily perpetuated and justified by media. When white people have been racist against black people, a common excuse given is that the black person deserved it for reasons that typically involve claims of their behavior, which typically involves negative racist stereotypes. Racism against black people has created false stereotypes such as that they are dangerous, untrustworthy, lazy, and aggressive. These stereotypes have lead to and validated victim blaming when black people have been oppressed and abused. For example, if a black person was beaten up in a predominantly white neighborhood, they could be told they were behaving in a suspicious or threatening manner. Instead of acknowledging the assault as wrong, perpetrators excuse their violence by claiming it was self-defense.

However, according to this phenomenon, if the aftermath of the black person's same behavior did not result negatively, the situation would not even be of consideration. This is called cognitive bias in which people's interpretation of behavior is influenced by traumatic events (Janoff-Bulman, "Cognitive Biases in Blaming the Victim"). Cognitive bias is problematic because it causes people to make false assumptions of people's behavior solely based on the outcome. In other words, if the same series of events were presented in two

scenarios with one positive outcome and one negative outcome, someone with cognitive bias would judge the behavior in the former scenario as acceptable but unacceptable in the latter.

In validating victim blaming by using racist stereotypes, perpetrators assert and confirm their power, privilege and control over black people. It is important to understand however, that these excuses are completely fictional and made up by the perpetrators to avoid punishment. Over time the excuses made by the privileged perpetrators against black people have been accepted by society. The prevalent use of victim-blaming by perpetrators quickly influences society and legislation which makes victim-blaming a norm. This causes victim-blaming to become more widespread which allows perpetrators to get away with and even benefitted by their wrongdoings. In turn, victims have been less and less able to find safety in society and the justice system.

Another oppressed group who is victim-blamed by their perpetrators are rape survivors. The blaming typically heard directly declares that in order to avoid being harassed or raped women should dress a certain way, behave a certain way and be careful about where they go. One reason women are told this is because cultural sexist expectations and criticisms of women that are used to victim-blame. Many rape survivors have been blamed by their rapists who claim the woman was "asking for it" because of her clothing or behavior (Anderson, K. J., & Accomando 24-28). By blaming the woman, the rapist can avoid being punished and continue to feel power over women. They may also feel free to rape again if they believe they are not at

10 Top Tips to End Rape

1 Don't put drugs in women's drinks.

2 When you see a woman walking by herself, leave her alone.

3 If you pull over to help a woman whose car has broken down, remember not to rape her.

4 If you are in a lift and a woman gets in, don't rape her.

5 Never creep into a woman's home through an unlocked door or window, or spring out at her from between parked cars, or rape her.

6 USE THE BUDDY SYSTEM! If you are not able to stop yourself from assaulting people, ask a friend to stay with you while you are in public.

7 Don't forget: it's not sex with someone who's asleep or unconscious – it's RAPE!

8 Carry a whistle! If you are worried you might assault someone 'by accident' you can hand it to the person you are with, so they can call for help.

9 Don't forget: Honesty is the best policy. If you have every intention of having sex later on with the woman you're dating regardless of how she feels about it, tell her directly that there is every chance you will rape her. If you don't communicate your intentions, she may take it as a sign that you do not plan to rape her and inadvertently feel safe.

10 Don't rape.

Looking for information and ideas on how to campaign against rape? Check out the following websites: www.thisisnotaninvitationtorapeme.co.uk www.notever.co.uk

fault. The following image is a response to victim-blaming in the case of rape:

Rapists also victim blame because they feel superior to women and in turn have a right to have

control over them. This perceived power is because of sexism, which in turn leads to victim-

blaming. More often than not, victims who are blamed for their abuse are often considered

unequal to the perpetrator in some way. In this circumstance, male gender privilege allows the

perpetrators to blame the victim without consequences (Anderson, K. J., & Accomando 24-28).

The excuses made by rapists are fabricated to obscure the reasons they actually attack women.

Victim-blaming is simply an easy way out to avoid consequences of wrongdoings and shift the

blame to the underprivileged victim.

Over time, perpetrators, invariably members of a group that seeks to dominate the victim

group, convince others with their victim-blaming to do the same. The phenomenon when

individuals do not help in emergency situations and either instead ignore it or enforce it is called

the bystander effect. In the circumstance of victim-blaming, the bystander effect is when

individuals allow crimes and further victim-blaming to occur. This occurrence is perpetuated as

the number of bystanders increases (Meyers). While someone may not himself or herself abuse

someone, participating in the victim blaming not only reinforces the social expectations and

fallacies perpetrated, but also prevents the victims' recourse for the crimes committed against

them as well as their ability to recover. Bystanders and society at large victim-blames in order to

protect themselves from the perpetrators. In other words, bystanders tell themselves that as long

as they don't do what a victim did to "deserve" the abuse they will be safe. This phenomenon is

called the Just World Theory; the idea is that only bad things happen to people if they did

something wrong to deserve it. The theory suggests that individuals convince themselves that the

world is a safe and just place and people get what they deserve (Andre, Velasquez). In the

following video, the origins of victim blaming and the just world theory are explained:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZp1YC7dMaU. If an event establishes the world as unjust,

people put the victim at fault or try to convince themselves and others that no injustice has

occurred. For example, an individual could assert that because the world is a just place, the

victim must have deserved their abuse for some reason or another (Andre, Velasquez). Declaring

the victim as deserving of their abuse to ensure a just world is a typical form of victim-blaming.

Society also tends to have an *optimism bias*, the belief that bad things happen to other people and

the world is safe (Britt). By believing the world is a safe place and all abuse is deserved, sociey

creates an illusion of control over all of their experiences.

Concept Map demonstrating a model for Fundamental Attribution, Optimism Bias and Just World Belief (Britt):
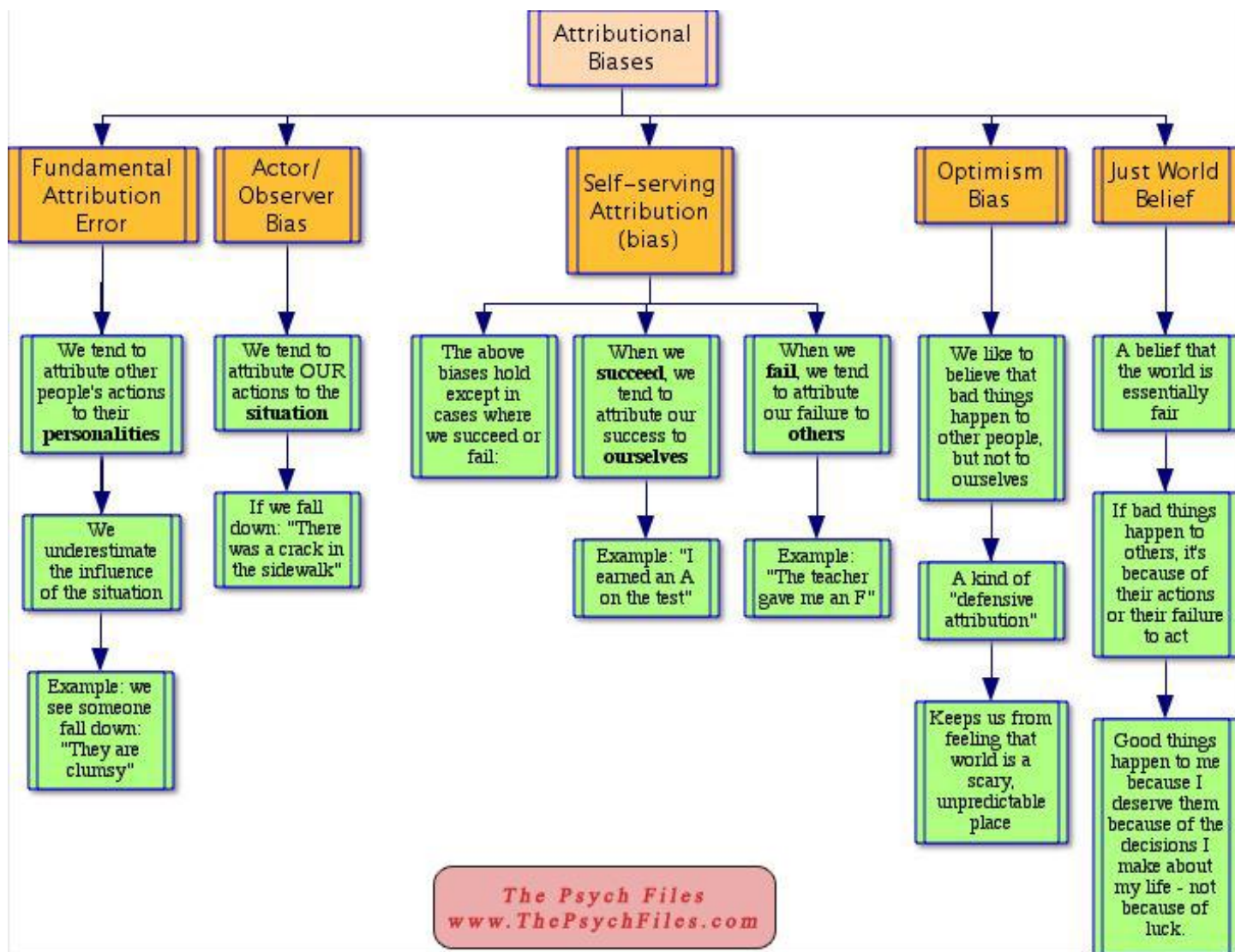
MR

Above is a comic found on Blogspot http://seesuzysketch.blogspot.com/2011/01/victim-blaming-cartoon-for-safer.html

Victim-blaming also gives society a false sense of security by deciding the victim must have done something wrong. This phenomenon, called the invulnerability theory, is related to the just world theory and optimism bias. People rely on a sense of a security to maintain mental well

being to reject the idea of losing control of their life or body. In the case of rape, the basis of this

circumstance is the act of being mentally or physically threatened or overpowered. According to

Janoff-Bulman, people desire to avoid this situation and by blaming the victim, they create an

illusion of invulnerability for themselves (Janoff-Bulman, "The Aftermath of Victimization"). To

remain invulnerable, one decides they must avoid doing the particular action that the victim did.

As long as they don't behave as the victim, they will not get raped. By creating an *us versus them*

boundary, people separate themselves from victims by behaving cautiously and creating a false

belief in underestimating the likelihood of getting raped. In addition, by declaring the victim did

something wrong, individuals are at fault for committing the *Fundamental Attribution Error*.

Fundamental Attribution Error occurs when someone's actions and experiences are attributed to

their personality and the influence and impact of the situation is ignored (Britt). Society assumes

in a case of rape that the victim was responsible and the severity of the situation of rape is drastically underestimated. Women are constantly advised by their peers and society on how to behave

and dress to avoid harassment and rape. An example of this is when a police officer in Toronto

told women if they wanted to avoid getting raped they should "avoid dressing like sluts"

(Stampler). Here the police officer is stating that women are raped because of what they wear.
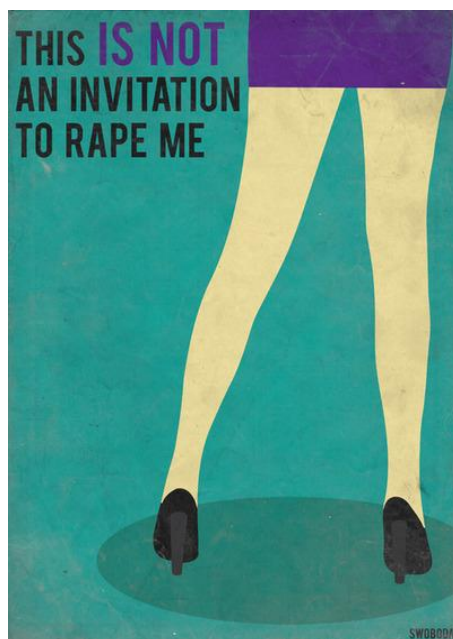
By saying this he is also saying that the rape is the woman's fault because she wore such

clothing. This excuse for the rape and blame of the victim is a rape myth regarding gender stereotypes. In some cases to blame the victim, women are represented as seductive, and men at the mercy of women and their natural hormones (Anderson, K.J., Accomando). In other words, women are "asking for it" with their behavior and attire and men cannot control their sexual drive. In many rape cases, women are not wearing provocative clothing or expressing themselves sexually. In 1990, the state of Florida passed a new law that prohibits citing a woman's attire as evidence for rape (New York Times). By passing this law, it was declared that the nature of women's clothing isn't relevant in rape cases.

Society will find false reason whether it is that the victims were out too late, in a dangerous area, intoxicated, and many more reasons for why they were raped. It is easier to blame the victim because it psychologically solves the problem for individuals and society: as long as you are good and do not behave a certain way, you will not be raped. The idea asserts that people who are raped or abused did something wrong and therefore deserved it. By claiming these reasons to be the cause of rape and abuse, individuals in society feels they successfully solve the problem to getting raped and abused and therefore feel secure.

Because of the rampant culture of victim-blaming by perpetrators and bystanders and society, even the victims will blame themselves for the abuse or social injustice they endure. Being a victim of abuse is traumatizing and causes victims to lose their sense of security and control over themselves. By blaming themselves, victims feel a sense of control and regain a

sense of mastery and power over their own destinies. By taking responsibility for the actions taken against them, victims feel that if they avoid the behavior that purportedly caused their abuse, they will avoid the abuse again.

According to Janoff-Bulman, it is adaptive for victims to blame themselves and develop an internal *locus of control* (Janoff-Bulman, "Esteem and Control Bases for Blame"). Locus of control is related to counter-factual thinking in which a victim experiences shame and guilt regarding their abuse (Boninger, Gleicher, and Strathman, Counterfactual Thinking).

Victim-blaming is maintained and enforced by participation in sexism, The Just World Theory, cognitive biases, and the theories of self-blame. Whether executed by the perpetrator, bystanders, society at large or the victim, victim-blaming is performed in order to have control and power. Perpetrators wish to have control, power and privilege over their victims to excuse their behavior to avoid punishment and maintain their freedom to abuse in the future. Bystanders, society, and victims want to have a sense of control and safety over their own destinies. Instead of recognizing and punishing the criminals, victim-blaming is a quick and simple solution. For many, it is easier to victim-blame rather than punish the perpetrators because it continues the status quo and gives underprivileged and oppressed groups an idea that they can avoid abuse and social injustice if they behave in a particular fashion. Unfortunately, because of victim-blaming, the real reasons people are abused is obscured and in turn the cycle of crime and oppression is continued and promoted. The perpetrators of crimes are always at fault, and while it may be impossible to rid the world of crime, it is imperative that justice is served. In order to place the blame where blame is deserved in social injustice, the social and personal phenomena perpetuating victim-blaming must be recognized and eradicated.

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