Victim Blaming and Victim-Blaming Shaming

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Abstract: By considering various case studies drawn from contemporary culture, I propose the idea of *victim-blaming shaming*, which, like victim blaming, involves replicating injustice by focusing attention on the particular situation rather than the general problem. In cases of victim-blaming shaming, a person is criticized for in any way addressing a problem by addressing the victim. Victim-blaming not only involves an inconsistent ethic, but because of this inconsistency promotes that which it opposes. It responds to a social problem by directing attention to an individual within that problematic social situation.
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INTRODUCTION

It is common to hear the concept of *victim blaming* invoked to criticize certain responses to violence and injustice. In its most strongly expressed form, victim blaming involves implications that the violence or injustice directed at a people was caused by the choices of the people themselves. Yet the term also gets directed at those who respond to an incident of violence or injustice by providing advice to the people upon whom the violence or injustice might be directed, advice intended to make those people modify their behavior in order not to be victimized. Both of these are incomplete responses to violence and injustice, and focus at least some attention away from the agents of the bad actions and toward those subjected to these actions, and thus add to the violence and injustice. In addition, they direct attention away from a larger social problem by acting as if the solution to the problem lies in the particular case. Victim blaming, and even to some extent agent blaming, are myopic responses to the social problem.

In what follows, I will be considering an additional form of injustice that I call *victim-blaming shaming*, which, like victim blaming, involves

replicating injustice by focusing attention on the particular situation rather than the general problem. In cases of victim-blaming shaming, a person is criticized for in any way addressing a problem by addressing the victim. Victim-blaming not only involves an inconsistent ethic, but because of this inconsistency promotes that which it opposes. It responds to a social problem by directing attention to an individual within that problematic social situation. Insofar as this is accompanied by a broader focus on the social problem, victim blaming shaming is relatively harmless. One should notice, however, that the act of shaming risks creating a situation of scapegoating, that is, the blaming of an individual for a larger problem. In short, reflexively shaming those who express ideas that suggest victim blaming is itself a form of victim blaming. These people, too, are caught up in a social problem.

CASE STUDIES IN VICTIM BLAMING

The following anecdotes, some of them hypothetical and other real, are presented for illustration.

1. *A coloring book that indicates "lead paint can kill!" and "labels neglectful and thoughtless the mother who does not keep her infant under constant surveillance"* (Ryan, 1971: 22). This is taken from a 1971 book by psychologist William Ryan called *Blaming the Victim*. Ryan uses "blaming the victim" to describe an ideology that pervades Americans' thought while remaining unnoticed, being filled with intentions toward "altruism and humanitarianism" (Ryan, 1971: 22). Blaming the victim happens when we study the people affected by the problem to see the differences that result from injustice, and then "define the differences as the cause of the social problem itself" (Ryan, 1971: 8). The subject of the social problems is identified as "as strange, different – in other words, as a barbarian, a savage." It involves an "exceptional explanation for a universal problem" (Ryan, 1971: 19). The ideology of victim blaming invents things such as a "culture of poverty" to study in response to economic disparities.

One way to address the problem of lead paint in the home is to focus critical attention only on the families affected by it. And whereas it is certainly advisable for parents to watch their children, the lead paint problem is not just a matter of policing parents so that they better police their children. Poor families likely cannot afford to strip and repaint their homes carefully, and their landlords might be unwilling to do so. The

easy fix is merely to assume that the poor families have take on this specific responsibility and can be blamed if they fail to fix the problem on their end.

2. *A driver is advised to lock his car doors, which otherwise would remain open whenever he parks.* The subject here is a self-proclaimed "old hippie priest" who is pacifist and focused on social justice, and who grew up in a poor neighborhood of a small city. Since it is relatively easy to steal an unlocked car, one is inclined to warn the man about his choice of leaving the car open. But stealing is not his fault. People should respect others' property. Although it takes little effort for him to lock the doors, this is something he should not have to do, since parked cars are presumed to be owned, and it is always wrong to take something you do not own.

The example could be made less trivial by considering whether he should be doing something more sophisticated and expensive, such as buying a car alarm. The rougher the neighborhood is generally perceived to be, the greater is the perceived need for theft protection. And yet where we would be at least inclined to say "you should have expected that" to the priest if he did not lock his doors, we would find it difficult to say that if he did lock his doors, but did not choose to buy a car alarm. There does not appear to be an absolutely clear justification of this difference, though. After all, we might want to say that, since he was already able to afford a car, he also should have spent the extra money to protect his investment with a car alarm. If the extra expense would have made the purchase unadvisable, then the purchase itself was inadvisable, at least according to this reasoning.

Advising the priest to lock his doors is the most benign form of blaming the victim, and advising the priest to get an alarm is shifting the focus in a way similar to that of the lead-paint families. We could say that he was negligent in not sufficiently acknowledging human nature, but this makes philosophically contentious assumptions about human nature. Historically people have stolen things, and that does not make it natural. Historically, humans have been filled with sin, and frequently break the commandment not to steal. This fact does not mean that stealing is natural in any sense that would exonerate the thief.

3. *A woman soldier is about to walk to her barracks at night, and is asked by a male soldier if she is going to be accompanied. She says she does not need it, and is approached by a different male soldier, and propositions her so persistently that she*

runs away in concern for her safety. This example is taken from a military training video, as presented in the 2012 movie *The Invisible War*. After the scene is presented, the training video narrator concludes that "sexual assault is preventable. Are you doing your part ?"

A commentator of the training video says that it amounts to saying that "anyone could be a rapist" so "we all have to be on alert." This is neither a false premise nor an unreasonable conclusion. What it misses, however, is the bigger picture. So, too, does the commentator's further assessment, insofar as it assumes that the answer is only in having "systems of accountability that prosecuted and imprisoned perpetrators." This punishment approach is necessary, but not sufficient. In a context where violence and strategy are encouraged, and where submission to authority is required, it should not be surprising that there would be confusion on the matter of consent. Aside from a strict protocol of verbal consent, it is difficult to sort out where the military assertiveness ends and the rape begins. The problem with military rape, then, it is in its broadest sense a problem with military culture.

The movie argues, rightly, that the U.S. has taken a poor approach to addressing rape within the military. Because of the military's judicial system, and the command structure to which it is tied, it is difficult for the military to effectively address sexual assault as a general attitude, but easier for it to address the victim and her choices. This is apparent if one considers a different scenario, one in which the soldier is in a war zone, walks around alone at night, and is raped by an enemy soldier. In this case, one might be especially inclined to judge that the woman is almost entirely to blame for her rape. After all, one would say – particularly if they are male – that she is lucky she was not killed.

The problem is now apparent. Unless we are able to establish an unequivocal border between war and non-war contexts, it will be difficult not to see a woman walking alone at night, on the same streets in which our hippie priest parks his car, as being implicated. Should she have to take self-defense classes as a more sophisticated form of protection ? Literary theorist Camille Paglia argues that she would, referring to her own Roman-style paganism that valorizes violence, and her "Italian philosophy of life" that promotes "high energy confrontation" (Paglia, 1992: 53). Accordingly, she espouses, from a feminist perspective, a "woman's personal responsibility to be aware of the dangers of the world." Speaking about what she considers to be sexually repressed white women, she

says they act as if they "should be able to get drunk at a fraternity party and go upstairs to a guy's room without anything happening."

And I say, "Oh, really ? And when you drive your car to New York City, do you leave your keys on the hood ?" My point is that if your car is stolen after you do something like that, yes, the police should pursue the thief and he should be punished. But at the same time, the police – and I – have the right to say to you, "You stupid idiot, what the hell were you thinking ?" (Paglia, 1992: 57)

Taking this further is the question of whether the woman is required also to have a weapon, and if so, how powerful of one, in order to fend off rapists who can overpower her unaided self-defense. If not, then she is like the woman (or man) going vulnerably into a war zone, and the stupid idiot is lucky if she *only* gets raped. After all, the whole world is a dangerous place.

Such conclusions are perhaps the *reductio ad absurdum* of the pagan-Paglian military mindset.

4. *A celebrity couple--male baseball player and female actress--stores provocative photos of themselves, has these photos hacked and promulgated, and then is told that they shouldn't have been storing the pictures in the first place.* This case is similar to that of the car alarm. In a particularly rough area of the Internet, security could be compromised. Comedian Ricky Gervais tweeted a suggestion: "Celebrities, make it harder for hackers to get nude pics of you from your computer by not posting nude pics of yourself on your computer" (quoted in Robinson, 2014). In response to accusations of victim blaming, he tweeted thoughts about free speech in general, the risk of offense that comes with it, and the liberty of art to present something without condoning it.

Gervais is not completely wrong. His tweet seems motivated by an interest in considering the relative triviality of the original action. If it were a basic human need to take nude pictures and have them available to send to a lover, the victim blaming accusation would make more sense. Freely traveling in public spaces, including bad neighborhoods, is important, being part of a freedom of movement integral to human happiness. Seeing sexual images of a partner is arguably not so integral. Being sexually active is arguably a human need; having the ability to be visually stimulated whenever you want is probably not. One does not have to be considered a prude for believing that restriction of sexual stimulation is less harmful for a normal person than restriction of physical

travel would be. Any offense, for example, that one would take at a person directing sexual comments to a nearby woman jogger is premised on the idea that the woman's need to move without intimidation is more important than the man's freedom to verbally express his sexual stimulation.

The more difficult problem arises when we consider not just the level of triviality to the behavior, but also the degree of harm being done. By virtue of being celebrities, the couple is already accustomed to public attention. What about the case of the non-celebrity, though ? The need to have access to sexual stimulating images seems similarly weak, but the harm from stealing them seems worse, since the non-celebrities do not have the same kind of rich and ego-strengthening entertainment careers. But even here, the situation is not clear-cut. At least we can say that such pictures are not a need worth protecting in such a way that we feel compelled to shame people like Gervais.

5. *In an interview related to story about a police officer who is accused of raping women during traffic stops, another police officer advises people about their rights to stay in their car, but adds that it is best not to break the law in the first place.* The advising officer in this example noted first that "if the officer is engaging in predatory conduct or being off-color or improper in any way, that justifies telling him you're gonna use the phone to call the authorities and you're gonna stop having further dialogue with him." He was providing advice to avoid victimization, but people focused on his conclusion, presented as a paraphrase by the newscaster: The best tip is "to follow the law in the first place so you don't get pulled over" (Allen, 2014).

A charitable assessment of the situation is that the officer was trying to conclude the interview with something he thought was helpful, if not moralistic. An appropriate response comes from blogger Aimee Ogden, who satirizes the issue without directly shaming the altruistic and humanitarian victim-focuser. She offers differently focused advice:

1. You probably shouldn't be a police officer if this is something you find yourself thinking about a lot.

2. You probably shouldn't even be a citizen. Consider leaving polite society and becoming a hermit, where the possibility that you will rape someone during a traffic stop is approximately zero.

3. If you must be a police officer, just don't pull people over.

4. If you must pull someone over, don't rape them. This is not difficult. Billions of people manage to interact with each other every day without raping one another. You can do it, too.

6. *A female philosopher writes a book to convince educated women that they are making the wrong choice by foregoing a career in order to stay home with a family.* In Linda Hirschman's book *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World*, the author argues that too many women are doing a disservice to themselves, to feminism, and to the country by choosing to stay home with a family. Hirschman provides compelling reasons why women who make such a choice are in most cases unreflectively playing into male-centered attitudes. Insofar as she focuses on the women, however, some would find her thesis to be an example of victim blaming.

Hirschman criticizes what she calls "choice feminism," namely, the belief that any choice a woman makes is a feminist choice. In particular, she argues that a college educated woman's decision to drop out of the workforce in order to take care of home and family is, in fact, a bad decision, although today's feminism is too polite and accommodating of patriarchy to admit that. Today's feminism has been immobilized by a chorus of voices that drone out philosophical critique. As the long-dead male philosophers Plato and Aristotle have said, with the more recently dead male philosophers Mill and Kant agreeing, men must be engaged in the social and political sphere in order to live the good life. In the contemporary world, we take this only half seriously: we admit the necessity of non-domestic, political activity for human flourishing, but, either explicitly or implicitly, fail to take seriously this idea as applying to women as well. As Hirschman explains:

Deafened by choice, here's the moral analysis these women never heard: The family – with its repetitive, socially invisible, physical tasks – is a necessary part of life and has obvious emotional and immediate rewards, but it also allows fewer opportunities for full human flourishing than public spheres like the market or the government. This less flourishing sphere is not the natural or moral responsibility only of women. Therefore, assigning it to women is unjust. Women assigning it to themselves is equally unjust. (Hirshman, 2006: 24-25).

Hirschman is criticizing both the political policies and cultural attitudes that assign women to a smaller, domestic sphere, and the choices of the women themselves in accepting this assignment. Among her detractors are of course conservatives who believe the woman's place is in the home, but also liberals who believe that a woman's place is to be sheltered within her own choice to be in the home.

Liberal critics have accused me of taking the spotlight off employees and legislators, who should be providing women with day-care centers

and tax breaks. But those solutions have not happened. One reason they never happened is that such change can certainly never come out of the unspoken liberal/conservative agreement that women probably should do the child rearing and housekeeping (Hirshman, 2006: 64).

Hirshman believes that an unjust establishment has to be unsettled, at least in part, by the victims of that establishment. What remains to be considered, however, is a morally and logically problematic matter: to what extent should those victims be required to unsettle the establishment by playing along with that establishment ? One of Hirshman's most provocative, though warranted, claims is that a liberal arts education, a favorite of women, is a detriment to the cause of women's liberty in a culture that tries to bind them to the domestic sphere. She proclaims that "Frida Kahlo is no role model" (Hirshman, 2006: 46) and that women should "lose their capitalist virginity and prepare for good work" (Hirshman, 2006: 49). This is work that will make serious money, which correlates not only with political power, but with domestic power, since the poorer domestic partner often has to make the sacrificial choices. In both the political and the domestic sphere, money determines where and how you live.

The question remains, however, whether the idea of requiring the victim to be part of the process of social transformation amounts to victim blaming, or at least an inappropriate victim focusing. Hirschman's challenging rhetoric is intended to draws notice to what is, after all, a formidable philosophical point: What is so valuable about choice, after all ? Feminism, according to her, has followed the unreflective belief that choices require no further justification. Such a belief not only relies on the philosophically debatable question of whether free will exists, but on the practically relevant question of whether, even allowing for the possibility of free will, it remains that much of our decision-making is governed by environmental influence. If this environment is harmful, then we had better take responsibility to prepare ourselves with more than just our freedom to choose as a shield. The common belief is that questioning one's life choices seems rude and authoritarian. "But wait a minute," says Hirschman.

People choose to do all kinds of things that are questionable, if not plain wrong. They don't fasten their seat belts. They build McMansions in historic villages. They take dangerous drugs. They grind down their

workers' wages. Just because you can't put someone on the rack for something doesn't make it right. It just means that, on balance, the cost--mistake, corruption, disrespect--of having the state stop them is too great. Somewhere along the way, the idea that the state shouldn't dictate all behavior unnecessarily got translated into the idea that all behavior is morally equal, what the conservatives correctly castigate as "relativism." And criticizing someone's behavior becomes the equivalent of sending them to the gas chamber. (Hirshman, 2006: 70)

It is possible to fit each of Hirshman's examples into an understanding of victim blaming. The mansion builders are victims of the culture of consumption; the drug users are victims of a culture of hedonism; the capitalists are victims of labor-exploitative values. One refuses to fasten the seat belt because they have bought into a shallow libertarianism, namely the belief that freedom is good simply because it is freedom.

There does seem to be a point to addressing the individuals as well as the system. In his review of Alan Wertheimer's book *Exploitation*, Harry Brighouse points out that Wertheimer's view "that someone entering into a transaction in which she will knowingly be exploited is sometimes doing a wrong" does indeed constitute blaming the victim. And yet "assigning some degree of blame to the victim does not prevent us from also excusing her in many circumstances: there will often be extenuating circumstances which lead us to assign less blame to her for her wrong-doing" (Brighouse, 1993: 450). Victim-blaming shaming does not generally allow for such nuance, but scapegoats the victim blamer for the mere mention of blame.

As Brighouse helpfully summarizes Wertheimer's view, though, "if it is wrong for A to exploit B, given that we have some degree of duty to prevent wrongs we are are able to prevent, surely B has a duty to attempt to avoid being exploited" (Brighouse, 1993: 450). Accordingly, a woman has a duty not to contribute to the male-gazed culture by making clothing choices that feed into it. Again, as Hirschman notes, legal restrictions are not always the answer, but this does not mean we must avoid all criticism. A woman might maintain that she can dress as she chooses, but her choice of clothing might have been conditioned by male-approved cultural values. To paraphrase Hirschman, if men assigning their sexualized value to women's clothes is unjust, women assigning value to their choice of wearing it is equally unjust.

FROM MORALISM TO PRAGMATISM

In his book on *Race Matters*, prophetic pragmatist Cornel West says that "many black folk now reside in a jungle ruled by a cutthroat market morality," and thus that their behavior is to be understood as more than just the result of "pathological behavior." Nonetheless, "saying this is not the same as asserting that individual black people are not responsible for their actions – black murderers and rapists should go to jail. But it must be recognized that the nihilistic threat contributes to criminal behavior" and "feeds on poverty and shattered cultural institutions" (West, 1993: 25).

West's understanding of responsibility is appropriate. It in most basic form, responsibility means *responding* to a situation, and we fail adequately to any situation if we fail to acknowledge both the individual and social sides of it. Victim blaming shaming risks avoiding the social side by focusing attention on a person who is addressing a problem in their own way. A contemptuous use of the concept of victim blaming – the shaming of victim-blamers – is not only be morally inconsistent, but might also also be deleterious. It replicates, in an admittedly less harmful form, the kind of injustice that is thought to be inflicted on the original victim. In Bryan's terms, it sees the person as the problem, rather than seeing the person caught up in the problem.

The problem in victim blaming is not simply that such attitudes are harming the victim, but that such attitudes, while attempting to help the victim, involve narrow assessments of the problem. Like West suggests, the approach should be comprehensive and critical, rather than individual and punitive. Victim-blaming shaming is punitive first, critical second. Reversing this prioritization requires allowing for the possibility of critiquing the victim's choices in ways not related to the particular incident of victimization. It would be a shame if, for example, the prevalence of rape resulted in suppressing feminist critiques of women's choices that, consciously or not, objectify themselves to fit into an environment of male desire. It is better to take a comprehensive approach, one in which the either/or of victim blaming or victim-blaming shaming is avoid for the sake of seeing what cultural values are conditioning the events. Women dressing provocatively or walking alone at night, people leaving their property relatively vulnerable to theft, and people putting themselves in situation in which their only way of dealing with a harsh

world is to assume that the world respects their choices, should all be subject to a non-moralistic form of critique. Those who awkwardly choose to evaluate these things only by focusing on the victim can be drawn into the bigger picture. But it does not help to shame them for not immediately seeing the bigger picture. The closer one gets to seeing the bigger picture, the more blaming and shaming can become irrelevant, giving way to considering how to ameliorate the problem.

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