Intergroup struggles over victimhood in violent conflict: The victim-perpetrator paradigm

Dr Sarah Jankowitz
Research Associate
The University of Sheffield

Mobile: +44(0)7580205568
Email: s.jankowitz@sheffield.ac.uk

Abstract

Most groups in violent, intergroup conflict perceive themselves to be the primary or sole victims of that conflict. This often results in contention over who may claim victim status and complicates a central aim of post-conflict processes, which is to acknowledge and address harms experienced by the victims. Drawing from victimology scholarship and intergroup relations theory, this article proposes the *victim-perpetrator paradigm* as a framework to analyse how, why and to what end groups in conflict construct and maintain their claims to the moral status of victim. This interdisciplinary paradigm builds on the knowledge that groups utilise the 'ideal victim' construction to exemplify their own innocence and blamelessness in contrast to the wickedness of the perpetrator, setting the two categories as separate and mutually exclusive even where experiences of violence have been complex. Additionally, this construction provides for a core intergroup need to achieve positive social identity, which groups may enhance by demonstrating a maximum differentiation between the in-group as victims and those out-groups identified as perpetrators. The paradigm contributes greater knowledge on the social roots of victim contention in conflict, as well as how groups legitimise their violence against out-groups during and after conflict.

Key Words

Victimhood, Conflict, Intergroup Relations, Responsibility, Violence

Introduction

Societies emerging from violent conflict around the world face a growing obligation to develop processes that serve to build peace and prevent a return to violence. Across the many 'post-conflict' mechanisms and systems designed to consolidate peace, a core assumption persists that acknowledging harms done to victims and holding perpetrators of those harms to account is paramount, and that victims should play a fundamental role in these processes (Brewer, 2010; Hayner, 2011; Huyse, 2003; Karstedt, 2010). These contexts, however, often produce competing claims to victimhood which complicate this imperative: 'in every serious, harsh and violent intergroup conflict, at least one side – and often both sides – believe that they are the victim in that conflict' (Bar-Tal et al., 2009: 229-230). Furthermore, group claims to victim status often accompany a denial of opposing groups' experiences of harm and the labelling of these other groups collectively as perpetrators. In a very practical sense, these exclusive claims to the be the primary or only victim in conflict leads to difficulty in identifying victims and addressing their needs (Jankowitz, 2017), undermining this central tenet of most peacebuilding and transitional justice (TJ) processes. While much research has been dedicated constructions of victimhood and the prevalence of intergroup processes in violent conflict respectively, a more joined up understanding of how the two interact may address questions about how, why and to what end groups make exclusive claims to victim status.

To better articulate these dynamics, this article develops the *victim-perpetrator paradigm* as a framework through which to analyse and understand conflicting perceptions of victims and perpetrators in intergroup conflict, and to address questions of how and why groups often go to great lengths to maintain their claims to be the genuine or 'real' victims. The paradigm builds upon existing theories including John Brewer's 'multiple victimhood' (2010), which describes how widespread violence creates an environment wherein most groups can be labelled as both victims and perpetrators, and Anthony Oberschall's 'double victim syndrome' (2007), which connects a group's identification as victims with the denial of both their own violence and the victimhood of adversary groups. Crucially, the victim-perpetrator paradigm draws from both sociological theories about the construction of victimhood, primarily those residing in victimology scholarship, and theories relating to the more social psychological inquiry into intergroup relations. In particular, these engage with social constructionist aspects of victimology and intergroup processes inherent in conflicts that occur at the group level. Together, these insights contribute to the victim-perpetrator paradigm, which describes how groups, primarily in contexts of intergroup conflict, utilise favourable constructions of the 'victim' to emphasise their in-group primacy in comparison to out-groups which are perceived collectively as 'perpetrators'.

This article begins with a review of well-established debates in the field of victimology on the social construction of victimhood, and specifically addresses the role

of social construction in how groups develop collective perceptions of 'victims' and 'perpetrators' around binary distinctions of innocence and guilt, good and bad, legitimacy and illegitimacy. This follows with an examination of intergroup relations theory, which resonates with the victim-perpetrator paradigm. In particular, this section sets up the argument that groups develop parallel, ethnocentric self-images of themselves as victims in order to distinguish themselves positively from groups perceived to be collectively responsible for violence, in turn connecting a sense of victimhood with a positive social identity. A brief section then pulls engages with several problematic ways the victim-perpetrator paradigm adds to the intractability of conflict while violence is on-going as well as during processes to address past violence and build peace. The article concludes by discussing the contribution the victim-perpetrator paradigm may offer scholarship relating to issues of victimhood, violence, conflict transformation and TJ.

My development of the victim-perpetrator paradigm grew out of a conceptual gap I identified over the course of conducting research into group perceptions of victims in Northern Ireland, and the impact of these perceptions on processes to build peace in the wake of the local conflict. For that reason, the paradigm is designed specifically in response to the unique circumstances and characteristics of violent, intergroup conflict that lend to exclusive and intractable understandings of victimhood and responsibility. In order to better set the stage for subsequent discussion, it is useful to first briefly outline these characteristics, which include the collective experience of violence, the

mobilisation of group identities and the decidedly negative, hostile relationship between groups.

Intergroup conflict is an overwhelmingly collective experience, where relationships between groups are characterised by violence that is directed towards people not because of their individual qualities or identities, but because of their membership in particular groups (Brewer, 2010: 12). Violence in such conflicts 'has been used by two or more groups against each other and there will be victims, perpetrators, bystanders and beneficiaries on all sides' (Govier, 2006: 22). This collective experience of violence permeates social groups and transcends the individual: 'Of course, communal violence is against the person in that an individual Catholic or an individual Tutsi is a victim, but it is their identity as a member of the group that explains their victimhood' (Brewer, 2010: 12; see also White, 2003). Significantly, the collective nature of violence in intergroup conflicts is 'particularly powerful and binding of the individual to the group' (Smyth, 2007: 68). This mobilises group identities and encourages individuals to view one another 'primarily in terms of whether they belong to the in-group or the out-group' (Stephan, 2008: 374). Interactions between in-group and out-group members are therefore determined largely by their group attributes and affiliations:

> …the more intense is an intergroup conflict, the more likely it is that the individuals who are members of the opposing groups will behave towards each other as a function of their respective group memberships, rather than in terms

> of their individual characteristics or interindividual relationships. (Tajfel & Turner, 2001: 95)

Because these interactions are based primarily on group membership, intergroup conflict and its associated attitudes and behaviours are seen as a reflection of a wider social structure that takes into account group boundaries, beliefs and attitudes about conflict, and individuals' desire to be part of groups that contribute to their sense of self-esteem and belonging. The collective, group-based nature of this type of violence begs a closer interrogation of the relationship between the individual and the group in order to understand how the constructions of victimhood and responsibility discussed earlier interact with intergroup attitudes, beliefs and behaviours within the social structures of intergroup conflict. The victim-perpetrator paradigm offers one way to approach the often contradictory and always emotionally-laden dynamics presented by violence in these settings.

Social construction of 'victims' and 'perpetrators'

It has long been the subject of debate within victimology that 'victim' is not an objective label, nor is victimisation an objective experience (Mawby & Walklate, 1995; Mendelsohn, 1994; Quinney, 1972; Viano, 1989; Wolfgang, 1957). Rather, in recognising that victim identification relies on subjective values and beliefs, victimology presents victimhood as a socially constructed, interactional concept that resonates with

beliefs about innocence, responsibility and context. These insights have begun to permeate the fields of TJ and peacebuilding, encouraging more critical analysis of the socio-political, legal, cultural and personal factors that influence beliefs about victims in violent conflict (Huyse, 2003; McEvoy & McConnachie, 2012). Dominant literature in these multidisciplinary fields, however, continues to engage the notion of 'victim' as uncomplicated in debates over how to reckon with past violence. This section outlines prominent arguments about the processes of social construction involved in developing beliefs about victims and perpetrators, and demonstrates how these constructed beliefs imbue those labelled 'victims' with a range of favourable characteristics that exemplify a sense of their morality and goodness.

Social constructionist schools of thought indicate that social processes construct knowledge and beliefs that individuals and groups use to organise a coherent and meaningful reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The lessons and patterns developed in victimology scholarship resonate strongly with social constructionism, and in particular the assertion that the concept of victimhood itself is subjective and constructed in social interaction. Victimologist Richard Quinney asserts that 'our conceptions of victimization are optional, discretionary, and by no means innately given […] in the larger social context, we all engage in commonsense construction of "the crime," "the criminal," and "the victim"' (1972: 314). Holstein and Miller (1990: 105) similarly argue that victimhood is produced through rhetoric and discourses of victimisation; perceptions of

victimhood ‘are reflexive in the sense that they both instruct observers in how to appreciate the situationally specific meanings of persons as “victims” and simultaneously invoke and create those meanings’ (Holstein & Miller, 1990: 105). This process proliferates a conventional wisdom about victimhood and becomes a routine process to label those we perceive as suffering from harm as ‘victim’, without thinking critically about how ‘we gloss the interpretive procedures through which the term is selected, applied, and justified’ (Quinney, 1972: 321).

Tracing the construction of the ‘victim’, Holstein and Miller frame victimisation as an interactional phenomenon. They argue that beliefs about victimhood stem from a context and interaction that involves both the victim and the action or actor that caused harm; in order for a victim to exist there must be a source of harm, and in order for an action to be considered harmful there must be a victim who has experienced harm. Processes of victimhood are therefore ‘contingent upon features of both victimizer and victim’ (Holstein & Miller, 1990: 103). Quinney elaborates the innate relationship between construction of the victim and attribution of responsibility for harm by arguing that, ‘acts… are defined as criminal because someone or something is conceived as a victim’ (1972: 315). Once the wrongfulness of an act is enshrined in law, victims are constructed in a way that instructs observers to consider how that person has been the object, not the source, of harmful behaviour and innately locates responsibility elsewhere: ‘Calling someone a victim encourages others to see how the labelled person has been

harmed by forces outside his or her control, simultaneously establishing the "fact" of injury and locating responsibility outside the "victim"' (Holstein & Miller, 1990: 106, see also Goodey, 2005: 2). An inherent parallel can therefore be traced between beliefs about victimhood and beliefs about responsibility that are reflected in the 'binary, one-dimensional terms' of 'victims' and 'perpetrators' that often simplify the experience of harm in violent conflict (Lawther, 2014a: 10). Asserting that the victim is not the source of harm implies that someone or something else must be: 'the assignment of victim status to persons is sometimes associated with the assignment of victimizer status to others' (Holstein & Miller, 1990: 107). The victim and the perpetrator, then, are inherently tied to one another as complementary opposites (Bouris, 2007).[1]

The 'ideal victim' is the dominant concept that describes what types of individuals are 'most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim' (Christie, 1986: 18). A concept first identified by Nils Christie (1986) in the field of critical victimology and later elaborated in the context of political violence and peacebuilding by Erica Bouris (2007), the ideal victim dominates discourse on victims of criminal wrongdoing, violent conflict, humanitarian disaster and other interactions where harm – real or perceived – is inflicted. Several key assumptions are attached to the ideal victim image, forming what Bouris calls a 'constellation' of characteristics that construct the

[1] The complex relationship between 'victim' and 'perpetrator' is the subject of debate from a range of perspectives, such as restorative justice scholarship which straddles local and international responses to violence and victimisation (see for example Braithwaite, 1989).

victim as innocent, unjustly harmed, and deserving of care, sympathy and support (2007: 32). This image conveys powerful moral meanings about the inherent 'goodness' of the victim, supported by the construction of the victim as the object, never the source, of harm. Moreover, these attributes appear to extend beyond the instance of victimisation in what Trudy Govier (2006: 29) calls a 'paradigmatic act', to render lasting judgements about the character of the victim based on the particular interaction in which he or she is harmed. The ideal victim also embodies the interactional nature of victimhood, directing society to understand and identify the source of harm as external to the victim and reinforcing the dichotomy between victims and perpetrators by mapping the labels across notions of good and bad, innocence and guilt, morality and immorality.

The incontrovertible notion of innocence tied to the ideal victim image communicates beliefs about the victim's inherently moral nature, and in the context of conflict innocence also acts as a descriptor of one's role in violence. A chain of equivalence is assumed so that, 'To be a real victim is to be an innocent victim, and anything less than innocence problematizes being recognised as a "real victim"' (Bouris, 2007: 39). Attaching to victims the concept of innocence directly invokes the language of responsibility and reflects back to the interactional nature of victimhood; if one party, the victim, is wholly innocent, there must be another whom is wholly guilty. To question the victims' innocence complicates beliefs about the harmful interaction, and subsequently undermines society's ability to attribute blame solely upon the perpetrator.

The ideal victim image resonates with and reinforces a simplistic narrative of 'good guys' and 'bad guys' that portrays victims and perpetrators as separate, distinct and mutually exclusive (Borer, 2003). Insofar as the ideal victim label is associated with assumptions about an individual's morality, the perpetrator label is constructed as inherently tied with clear perceptions of wrongfulness and immorality. Innocence and responsibility are rendered mutually dependent insofar as the morality and 'goodness' of the victim inversely relates to the ultimate responsibility and guilt of the 'wicked' perpetrator (Lawther, 2014b). This 'good guys' and 'bad guys' aspect of public discourse also provides victims with validation of the 'blamelessness in their suffering, maintaining the myopic view of the wrongfulness of a perpetrator' (Moffett, 2014: 10). Demonstrating that 'there is an identified, concrete and specific perpetrator… who has to be punished for his act' (Bar-Tal, 2003: 83) offers victims an unquestionable sense of their own innocence and moral standing. This favourable sense of self, derived from assumptions about the innocence and morality of the victim, play a central role in the framework of the victim-perpetrator paradigm.

Crucially in terms of instrumentalising victims' innocence, labelling an individual or a group in such a way directs society to view them not only according to accepted beliefs about innocence and morality, but also to feel that the harmed party did not deserve their fate. Some scholars argue that harm being 'unjust' or undeserved is indeed a qualification for victim status:

> The mere experience of the harmful event is not enough for the emergence of the sense of being a victim. […] In order to have this sense there is the need to perceive the harm as being undeserved, unjust and immoral, an act that could not be prevented by the victim. Bar-Tal et al., 2009, p 232 (see also Viano, 1989).

That the ideal victim is seen as unjustly harmed exemplifies their vulnerability and/or helplessness, justifying their subsequent entitlement to sympathy, support, and even help in exacting retribution against those seen as their victimisers (Smyth, 2003: 126). As the object of harm, victims can demonstrate that they exercised no choice or agency in the harmful interaction, in contrast to the perpetrators who made the 'moral choice' to expose the victim to harm (Smyth, 2004: 5).

The ideal victim image conversely implies that those who do not conform to the ascribed characteristics are not only less entitled to victim status, but perhaps that they are more 'guilty' and therefore deserving of harsh punishment. The idea that a victim is someone who has suffered harm unjustly, or what is more, that someone who perhaps has suffered harm justly is *not* a victim, legitimises attitudes and behaviours towards those identified as perpetrators in conflict. The implications of these constructions and their interactions with intergroup processes are discussed in greater detail in the final section of this article.

The favourable image of the ideal victim and binary construction of a victim-perpetrator dichotomy are crucial components of the victim-perpetrator paradigm.

Problems with these simplistic perceptions are numerous, however most groups embroiled in intergroup conflict construct themselves and their narratives in accordance with the characteristics of the ideal victim, labelling opposing groups as perpetrators and subsequently denying that their own actions may have also created victims. This results in a situation where groups hold opposing views of victimhood and responsibility, and each believes that only their claim to victim status is rooted in reality. As the following section elucidates, these views also shape group identifications, behaviours and intergroup attitudes. TJ mechanisms such as truth commissions and tribunals struggle to accommodate these contradicting constructions in their attempts to engage with 'victims' and 'perpetrators', often reinforcing disparities between groups by privileging certain narratives of victimhood over others. The following section builds upon the discussion around prevailing constructions of and meanings attached to victimhood and responsibility in conflict, outlining the key areas of intergroup relations and intergroup conflict that underpin the victim-perpetrator paradigm.

Intergroup claims to victimhood

Social constructions of victimhood cannot be viewed in a vacuum, as the attendant beliefs and attitudes associated with these constructions necessarily operate within a given social structure. In particular, intergroup processes which generate a favourable image of one's own group interact with constructions of victimhood, responsibility and

violence to shape the victim-perpetrator paradigm. Intergroup conflict therefore presents an exceptionally challenging environment for conflict transformation and TJ where conflicting claims about innocence and blame are pervasive and are often woven into the fabric of conflict itself. In these settings, assumptions about victimhood are filtered through the lens of group-level social processes which encourage favourable beliefs about one's own group(s) and negative or antagonistic views about relevant other groups. The labels of 'victims' and 'perpetrators' in effect become a proxy for wider conflict narratives of morality, legitimacy and responsibility. Because intergroup conflict presents a context in which groups experience violence collectively and most in turn identify as victims, it seems natural that these groups 'develop parallel images of self and other, except with the sign reversed; that is, the two parties have similarly negative enemy images and similarly positive self-images' (Fisher & Kelman, 2011: 66). Several key areas of intergroup relations theory resonate with perceptions and attitudes driving the victim-perpetrator paradigm, including the processes of categorisation and comparison, depersonalisation, ethnocentrism and social identity theory.

The study of intergroup relations explores the social and cognitive processes that determine how 'people behave towards one another as members of different social groups' (Hogg & Abrams, 1988: 32). Central to intergroup relations is the idea that social groups are created through a social categorisation process whereby individuals classify and order the social environment as a means to make sense of the world and their role

within it (Allport, 1954; Brewer, 2001a). These groups are the product of a categorisation process that renders groups meaningful and salient primarily when distinctions and comparisons are made between them (Hogg, 2001; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Groups 'exist by virtue of there being outgroups' and so, 'for a collection of people to be a group there must, logically, be other people who are not in the group… or people who are in a specific outgroup' (Hogg, 2001: 56). Once an individual identifies with a group, there is 'an accentuation of the perceived similarities between the self and other in-group members, and an accentuation of the perceived differences between the self and out-group members' (Stets & Burke, 2000: 225). It is this ability of intergroup relations to shape individuals' identities in relation to their group membership and their subsequent beliefs, attitudes and behaviours towards other groups that renders the approach so useful in generating understanding of the complex dynamics in conflict. The mere fact of categorisation is often enough to heighten the perceived similarities within categories and exaggerate differences between them (Brewer, 2001a; Fisher & Kelman, 2011), however Hogg adds that:

> …the [accentuation] effect is stronger if it is important to distinguish between the groups (e.g. you belong to one of the groups) and if the personal dimension is also important (e.g. a strongly evaluative dimension like "nice-nasty" or "honest-dishonest"). 2001, p. 59

In settings of conflict, heightened group awareness and the perception of zero sum relations with opponent groups produces greater degrees of hostility and therefore greater efforts to accentuate comparisons between in-group and out-groups.

In these fractured relationships, groups focus mainly on aspects of their own identity that compare favourably with particular aspects of the opponent group's identity (Schirch, 2001: 150-151). It is common, then, for these contexts to be characterised by intensely ethnocentric attitudes and perceptions (Brewer, 2001). By accentuating the similarities between members of the in-group, a process of depersonalisation occurs whereby individuals identifying with a particular group acquire the beliefs, attitudes and characteristics associated with the group (Bar-Tal et al., 2009: 235). The depersonalisation phenomenon contributes to the victim-perpetrator paradigm in that groups attribute to their own members the characteristics of the ideal victim. In striving for self-esteem and self-enhancement, groups attribute to themselves, through a process of depersonalisation, those aspects of the ideal victim construction that offer them opportunities for positive comparison against relevant other groups. In order to create a maximum differentiation between themselves and relevant other groups with whom they have negative or zero sum relationships, groups further depersonalise members of out-groups by labelling them collectively as perpetrators who are responsible for their victimisation. These labels are also a function of ethnocentrism, which denotes an in-

group attachment related to negative out-group attitudes and intergroup differentiations (Tajfel, 1982).

The key motivating factor driving group identification and social comparison can be summarised broadly as the desire for a positive self-image which may be described in social psychological terms as positive social identity. Social identity refers to an individual's knowledge that he or she is a member of a particular social group and, moreover, indicates that he or she derives some value from that group membership. The basic premise of social identity theory is that 'a social category… in which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category' (Hogg et al., 1995: 259). Besides providing a coherent social structure, social categories and distinctions carry cognitive and emotional significance for group members, offering opportunities for evaluative benefits through social comparison and 'a system of orientation for self-reference' (Tajfel & Turner, 2001: 101). Social comparisons between groups become value-laden, offering not only descriptions of difference inherent to categorisation, but also evaluations of groups in relation to one another where groups and their members may be evaluated as 'better' or 'worse' than other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2001). Social identities define one's place within the prevailing social structure, serving comparative and evaluative functions that impact an individual's self-esteem as well as prescriptive functions by encouraging individuals to incorporate certain group attributes and behaviours into their own self-

concepts. Individuals may possess multiple social identities to which they attach a range of meanings (Hogg & Abrams, 1988: 19). If a group can achieve an evaluatively positive social identity, its members can access the self-esteem that individuals seek to derive from group identification. The unquestionably favourable constructions of the victim as innocent, moral and deserving of care sympathy, and provide a positive self-concept and social identity.

Significantly, social identity theory posits that individuals endeavour to achieve or maintain positive social identity, which relies on, among other things, favourable comparisons between the in-group and relevant out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2001: 101). It is the pressure to achieve these favourable comparisons that instigates attempts to maximise differentiation between in-group and out-group, which is where the prevailing construction of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' as diametric opposites comes into play. Because intergroup violence is perceived as a group matter, and individual losses are experienced collectively, groups acquire a 'social identity within the group's perceptions of the events' (Bar-Tal, 2003: 81). This identity reinforces ethnocentric attitudes and behaviours towards out-groups that may be detrimental to conflict transformation and peacebuilding efforts.

The functionality of relations between groups determines their need to distinguish themselves positively at the intergroup level. Relations between groups that are largely positive and peaceful are less likely to be explicitly ethnocentric or contain unfavourable

stereotypes and hostile attitudes towards the out-group (Sherif, 2001: 66). Although some scholarship argues that there is not always a clear relationship between in-group favouritism and out-group hostility (Brewer, 2001a: 18), studies continue to show that even when there is no explicit conflict or competition between groups, or where categorisations are arbitrary or imposed, in-group favouring behaviour is still observed (Turner, 1975: 5).

In contexts of division or intergroup conflict, however, boundaries between groups are particularly dichotomous and 'differentiated along a single primary categorization, such as ethnicity or religion' (Brewer, 2001a: 34). The desire to distinguish the in-group from relevant out-groups 'become[s] heightened as each group feels under threat and rallies around increasingly defensive collective identities seeking to maintain ontological security' (Smithey, 2011: 13). Individuals in these contexts often have fewer social identities within their repertoire, so they 'cherish the identities they have, fiercely preserving their positive aspects vis-à-vis outgroups' (Hogg & Abrams, 1988: 74). Relations between groups in conflict may be characterised as zero-sum, and therefore beliefs about the inherent nature of each group are filtered through increasingly ethnocentric attitudes: 'The in-group is perceived as positive and superior, whereas out-groups are seen as inferior and/or threatening' (Riek et al., 2008: 256). Importantly, the role of ethnocentrism in the victim-perpetrator paradigm demonstrates one of the more detrimental consequences of these intergroup constructions of victimhood and

responsibility, which is that any number of groups will view themselves as the victims and their opponents as the perpetrators. Often in these zero-sum relations, 'the very existence of the outgroup, or its goals and values, must be seen as a threat to the maintenance of the ingroup and to one's own social identity' (Brewer, 2001a: 27). These perceptions both instigate ethnocentric intergroup attitudes in conflict and form the identities that lend to the intractability of intergroup violence.

The processes responsible for constructing beliefs about what it means to be a victim and who may claim victim status resonate with intergroup processes that help groups to develop and maintain favourable views of themselves in comparison to others regardless of the objectivity or accuracy of those views. The desire for a favourable image of the in-group, or positive social identity, may be so strong that groups employ cognitive strategies to maintain the positive self-concept achieved through the subjective belief structures of social comparison. In other words, groups highlight attributes that result in positive comparisons in relation to other groups and ignore or minimise those that do not. This often involves differentiating and evaluating the in-group from the out-group 'on dimensions on which the ingroup falls at the evaluatively positive pole' (Hogg & Abrams, 1988: 23). Comparisons between in-group and out-group (along favourable dimensions) construct and maintain a group's positive self-image and protect their sense of self-esteem. This effect is pronounced during intergroup conflict, where perceptions of the in-group as compared to the out-group may be couched in wider socio-political

antagonisms. By labelling in-group members, or, collectively, the in-group itself, as the primary victim in conflict, groups may use the construction of the ideal victim and its favourable attributes to portray themselves positively and attain maximum differentiation from relevant out-groups.

Intergroup relations processes contribute to the victim-perpetrator paradigm the social structures within which groups develop their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours about their victimhood and the responsibility of relevant other groups for violence. These structures are informed by dominant social constructions of victimhood, in that groups seeking to offer their members positive social identity appropriate the favourable attributes associated with the ideal victim and apply them to their members. In order to maximally differentiate their own members from members of the enemy out-group in a way that ensures a positive evaluation for the in-group, this social identity as 'victim' offers a built-in positive comparison against the constructions of a 'perpetrator' as inescapably negative and wholly responsible for violence and harm. As this section has alluded, the comparisons between groups are not necessarily grounded in objective evaluations. One of the more detrimental implications of the dynamics shaping the victim-perpetrator paradigm is that intergroup processes and the related desire to achieve positive social identity as 'victims' often lead to group-serving explanations that perpetuate violence during conflict and prove problematic for peacebuilding and TJ mechanisms attempting to address victimhood and responsibility.

Group-serving narratives of violence and legitimacy

While these theories generate a clearer conceptual understanding of how the victim-perpetrator paradigm operates, it is useful to illustrate its implications for group behaviour and in particular the framing of violence and legitimacy in conflict. The victim-perpetrator paradigm describes a phenomenon in which groups rely on exclusive constructions of victimhood to support their favourable self-image and emphasise the differentiation between themselves and groups they label as perpetrators. Being accused of or held responsible for atrocities committed in the course of conflict naturally compromises a group's favourable self-image: 'Even if one did not personally participate in these crimes, accusations and war crime trials are experienced as an attack against the entire group because they lower the image and dignity of all' (Oberschall, 2007: 26). In order to protect their favourable self-concept achieved through social comparison and subjective belief structures, groups use strategies to reinforce beliefs and attitudes that 'are not necessarily accurate reflections of society' (Hogg, 1996: 67). There are several problematic ways groups frame violence in order to maintain their moral claims to victim status that flow from the victim-perpetrator paradigm, which include the justification of in-group violence against relevant other groups, denial that out-group members may also be victims and the distancing of any groups members who are responsible for violence that cannot be justified as 'legitimate'.

Firstly, the construction of the victim as harmed unjustly by an out-group whose members are collectively responsible often leads to a justification of violence against out-groups as legitimate. Both victims and perpetrators act collectively as proxies for group interests and are depersonalised or dehumanised at the intergroup level (Brewer, 2010: 12; Schirch, 2001). In intergroup conflict, and specifically in relation to the victim-perpetrator paradigm, actions and beliefs towards out-groups are a reflection of a wider social structure and 'rely on the symbolic lenses of people in conflict' (Schirch, 2001: 147). In other words, although violence may be committed by individuals, that violence 'is initiated and carried out within a social system… [and] the social system provides the rationales and the justifications for the violence' (Bar-Tal, 2003: 79). Action against the in-group is framed as undeserved, and justifies violence committed on behalf of the in-group.

Violence on behalf of vulnerable, innocent victims 'can be construed as self-defence and can therefore be justified, thereby legitimising violence carried out by or on behalf of victims' (Smyth, 2006: 20). This becomes a way for groups to frame their violence as morally just and to protect their positive social identity. Without claiming victim status, 'violence becomes too naked, politically inexplicable, and morally defensible. The acquisition of the status of victim becomes an institutionalized way of escaping guilt, shame, or responsibility' (Smyth, 2003: 127). Continued justification and

legitimisation of violence as a function of one's own victimisation leads to cycles of violence which only serve to reinforce groups' senses of being collectively victimised.

This justification of in-group violence leads to the attitude that any harm suffered by the out-group was legitimate, which counters the construction of the ideal victim as unjustly harmed and therefore minimises or denies their claims to victim status. As Oberschall (2007) rightly identifies in relation to what he calls 'double victim syndrome', claims to in-group victimhood often rely on denial that members of the out-group may have valid claims to victimhood in order to interpret their experience and their members favourably. Accepting any blame for wrongdoing undermines groups' alignment with the ideal victim image, and therefore denial of out-group victimhood serves to perpetuate an 'image of blamelessness' (Lawther, 2013: 166) in dominant constructions of victims. This denial may take a number of forms, including a comprehensive denial of any evidence that members of the in-group may be responsible for violence against the out-group or more insidiously, that members of the out-group may not be victims because the violence of the in-group was justified, and that those out-group members deserved their harm. In instances where this denial is unsustainable, another tactic to preserve the positive social identity of the in-group is the distancing of those in-group members whose violence cannot be framed as justified or legitimate. This entails casting individuals as 'deviant' to allows members of the in-group to claim that 'bad apples' or 'rogue agents'

within their ranks do not represent them collectively and their negative actions do not characterise the group as a whole (Hogg, 2001: 67).

In societies emerging from violent conflict and developing processes to address past violence by 'righting' past wrongs and addressing grievances in order to repair relationships between former adversaries, the denial of groups' victimhood may compound grievance, re-traumatise individuals and guide policies that undermine reconciliation by excluding parts of society (Huyse, 2003). When the 'equality of victimhood' is denied, it fails to become the uniting experience it could amongst those who share similar legacies of harm and suffering. Instead, victimhood remains fiercely divisive and in some cases becomes a foil to continue fighting the conflict within structures aimed at consolidating peace.

Conclusion

The experience of intergroup conflict presents a challenging, complex set of dynamics that include group perceptions, beliefs and attitudes about victimhood and responsibility that emanate from collective experiences of violence and harm. The victim-perpetrator paradigm is a framework to analyse and understand conflicting perceptions about victims and perpetrators in these settings. Specifically, it presents the binary, polarising dichotomy between victims and perpetrators as a construction in which victims demonstrate characteristics of innocence and morality, in contrast to perpetrators

who are understood as guilty and morally corrupt. These constructions encourage groups in conflict to identify collectively as victims while labelling relevant other groups as perpetrators. At an intergroup level, the prevailing construction of victims as innocent, moral and unjustly harmed serves the in-group's favourable self-image and provides a maximum distinctiveness when evaluated against the inherent immorality of the out-group as perpetrators. These favourable self-perceptions and positive evaluation against the 'perpetrator' group reinforce one another to provide group members with claims to positive social identity.

The development of the victim-perpetrator paradigm seeks to contribute to examinations of victimhood and its role in violence and transition to peace in a number of ways. On the surface, it offers insights into how perceptions of victimhood and responsibility contribute to the intractability of violence in settings where group-level conflict is pervasive such as Israel/Palestine. In these contexts, the paradigm may also lend greater understanding to the sociological and social psychological processes implicated in perpetuating cycles of violence. From a more proactive perspective, the lessons contained in the victim-perpetrator paradigm may prove useful to scholars and practitioners developing innovative ways to end violence as well as others involved in TJ interventions after direct violence has largely ended. Because the victim-perpetrator paradigm contains intergroup relations in its makeup, its utility may extend to the

significant amount of theorising that already exists on how to intervene on and improve hostile or zero sum relationships between groups.

Finally, the victim-perpetrator paradigm contributes to arguments that seek to complicate exclusive, narrow approaches to victimhood and responsibility in conflict. In contrast to the victim-perpetrator paradigm, complex, inclusive approaches to victimhood hold that the image of the ideal victim is subjective and does not reflect the 'messy' realities of intergroup conflict. These complex constructions accept that individuals from all sides of conflict have been impacted by violence in diverse ways, separating beliefs about victimhood from assumptions about innocence or responsibility. This construction, which has been called 'alternative victims' (Quinney, 1972) or 'complex victims' (Bouris, 2007) also encourages a more nuanced conception of responsibility, where questions of individual and collective responsibility, commission and omission are debated and explored. Complex constructions of victimhood, then, challenge the victim-perpetrator paradigm by intervening on intergroup processes that render judgements on the legitimacy of violence and embracing the complexity presented in intergroup conflicts rather than perpetuating the intractable, competing claims to exclusive notions of victimhood.

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