BRILL

Sociology and Beyond: Agency, Victimisation and the Ethics of Writing

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Abstract
During the last decades, development discourse has taken a neo-liberal turn. Parallel to this, the discourse of social science has become more oriented to matters of individual agency. Within the sociological and anthropological literature on development, this emphasis on individual agency is often expressed in terms of an explicit statement taken by the author that s/he wishes to correct an earlier (ethically inferior) emphasis on structure that is assumed to imply that the concerned people are passive victims. Problematising this ethics of scientific writing, this paper will look at various discourses in which the concept of victimhood is used, seeing claims and disclaimers of victimhood as themselves being expressions of agency in a contestation over accountability, responsibility, recognition and possible indemnification or blame.

Keywords
Agency, victimhood, discourse, recognition, ethics

Introduction

Contemporary texts in sociology and anthropology often position themselves morally by stating, "These people are not victims, but agents." The purpose of the present paper is to problematise the place of such normative tropes in science and to spell out some of the implications of the trope.

A few examples from women's studies can illustrate the general formula. Pelak (2005: 66) asserts that, "South African women footballers are not simply victims of sexist, racist, colonialist relations, but are active agents in negotiating structural inequalities and ideological constraints in the social institution of sport." Povey (2003) writes under the headline: "Women in Afghanistan: Passive victims of the borga or active social participants?" An abstract by Alley et al. (1998) states that, "....a few studies have challenged the stereotype of homeless women as passive victims and demonstrated that they are active in seeking solutions to their problems…" Similar formulations abound also in the literature on other disprivileged social categories. I will refer to them as the

ANV trope ('Agents Not Victims'). They occur also in official discourse, e.g., in Swedish policy documents relating to immigration or development aid. Former Minister of Foreign Aid, Jan Carlsson, thus stated about refugees: "They are not victims but people who seek to govern their own lives." In a study of Swedish development NGOs, Gunnarsson et al. (1999) found that such organisations emphasised, among other values governing their communication, that they did not want ".... to show people as victims but as having power and capacity for initiatives."

Echoes are also heard in public debate and everyday conversation. Drafting this article in summer 2005, I listened to a morning broadcast, in which 'words-on-the-way' for that day were delivered. The listeners were told not to see themselves as victims, but as responsible for their own life. The day after, a colleague remarked about Ghanaian market women: "They are no damned victims, but capable people." Sometime later, three young Suryoyo girls were interviewed in Sweden's largest daily after serious riots in their home community.[1] They complained that they felt humiliated by the media. "After Ronna, we are depicted as will-less victims. We are not," they said.

The wish to write respectfully about our informants is not new in anthropology, but the value basis for respectful writing changes with time. Before the post-modern turn in anthropology brought agency to the fore, efforts were made by anthropologists to prove the rationality of apparently incomprehensible actions and beliefs (Sperber 1982). Rationality, an extremely multidimensional term, was the rod for measuring the value of others. Definitions of respectful co-humanness take departure in historically contingent images of what constitutes a worthy human being.

Moralising arguments of the ANV type are also launched in debates about whether structure or agency should be emphasised in social science. How do a certain category of individuals use their scope for action to pursue particular instrumental or communicative goals? How do regularities at a supra-individual level — structures of resource endowment, legal rules, spatiality, cultural conventions — circumscribe, induce or enable action (Giddens, 1979: 59–69; Smith, 1999: 10–11)? One may argue about the analytical efficiency of emphasising either of these types of questions and obviously, the choice correlates with the political ideology of the researcher. In the present paper I am, however, not concerned with these aspects, but with the moral basis of the ANV trope.

The trope represents a pre-theoretical moral commitment. Rather than to offer an elaboration in theoretical terms of the analytical gains to be made, the

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[1] (Dagens Nyheter: 21 September 2005)

statement is part of the self-representation of the author *vis-à-vis* anonymous dialogical others. The trope justifies the messages of the text in terms of an ethics of representation, as an attempt to redress stereotypes, prevalent in the mind of an unspecified public or implicit in theoretical approaches to which the author does not want to be aligned. While the trope is no longer an original challenge to mainstream thinking, it signals that the writer is critical and engaged.

A 'victim' is basically a person suffering for reasons unrelated to his/her own agency. The archetypical victim has not effectively caused or provoked her own predicament — neither intentionally nor unintentionally. Instead, the concept blames some other wilful perpetrator, or more general circumstances unaffected by the victim. In Gilligan's terms, "The 'victim' is the diminished agent par excellence… Victims are, by definition, passive objects who have been acted upon by other forces, not active agents. They are defined by the mark that has been made on them rather than the mark that they have made on the wider world. In as far as they are victims, they are devoid of volition or intent" (Gilligan, 2003: 29).

'Victim' in its core sense is a relational term referring to a particular misfortune. If we look at contrasting alternatives offered by different versions of the ANV trope, we find that the victim is also depicted as generally lacking 'power', 'inner force', 'responsibility', 'capacity for initiatives' or 'agency'. Victims are 'not participating in their own history', 'weak', and 'passive'.

Serious intellectual thought about victimhood is found in feminist sociology/anthropology and in the criminological sub-branch of victimology. How have these disciplines treated the issue?

Feminism and the Concept of Victims

Feminist theorists emphasise how women actively negotiate their own subject positions and the constraints put up by prevalent discourses, stressing the critical role of discourse in structuring social relations. American feminist writers in the early 1990s put emphasis on female victimhood (Flood, 1999), to get recognition for battered women after a situation where violence towards women was considered a private matter. Activists in their support networks demanded that abused women should be given legal status as victims. Victim terminology made visible formerly hidden structures of inequality and oppression (Agevall, 2001: 26–28). Later in the 1990s, critics like Wolf (1993), Roiphe (1993) and Denfeld (1995) challenged 'victim feminism' with 'power feminism'. According to Wolf, the former idealises women and demonises men. Wolf asked for a feminism that claims equality simply because women

are entitled to it (1993: xvii), seeing women as human beings — sexual, individual, no better or worse than men.

Stringer (2001) perceptively summarises this feminist debate about victimhood. Arguing that different debators operate with different 'victim' concepts, she notes that already the early anti-abuse activists who used the term worried that 'victimhood' might turn into a performative identity for individuals presenting themselves as victims of others. It is held that this stance is taken to invite further victimisation, 'victim' then connoting not just a person who is innocently hurt, but a person who considers this to be an essential part of her personality and social relations. 'Victim behaviour' combines unnecessary and inefficient complaint with passive yielding to abuse.

Feminists within, as well as outside, the activist movement solve the problem of such 'victim mentality' by encouraging victims to think of themselves as capable actors. Various strategies have been used to achieve this. An article on women's physical self-defence (De Welde, 2003) claims to illustrate a process of 'reframing victimisation, liberating the self, and enabling the body in a transformation of gender and self-narratives that affirm 'femininity while subverting its defining ideologies'. More common strategies have been discursive. Anti-abuse activists suggest that the term 'survivor' should be substituted for 'victim', generally and at the individual level, a switch representing emancipation from a destructive self-image of passivity, powerlessness, vulnerability, feelings of guilt, pain, confusion and shame. In contrast, 'survivor' is associated with resourcefulness, courage, anger, and resistance, and is also seen as an earned title. (Agevall, quoted in Kelly et al., 1996: 91). Surviving is not supposed to rest on passive endurance, but on mobilised resistance. In Sweden, feminists and anti-abuse activists have adopted the translation 'överlevare' or as the National Organisation Against Sexual Abuse prefer, 'hjälte', (Lindgren, 2004: 29) i.e., 'hero', with even stronger connotations of autonomous preparedness to take to action.

As Stringer notes, the discursive approaches used by 'victim feminism' resemble Wolf's 'power feminism'. The goal of both branches of feminism is empowerment through an improved self-image. Both camps hold that an emphasis on the victim role strikes back at women. They see a need to recognise women as agents, and require that female writers and speakers neither posit themselves, nor other women as passive, lest they reproduce an oppressive ideology. An explicit ethics of writing is, thus, present.

Victimology

Victimology as a branch of criminology aims to disentangle the empirical analysis of perpetrators, targets of crimes and their mutual interaction from

socially constructed presuppositions about the agency, innocence etc. of the same categories. For this purpose, the discipline uses the concept of 'victim' only technically and with the explicit ambition to avoid moral judgements and issues of blame.

Since the 1980s possibilities for crime victims to get support and indemnification have been furthered in several countries, emphasising their need to get their status legally recognised. Such legal definitions relate to suffering from acts which have actually been criminalised in that particular historical context. Christie (1986) describes the characteristics that the target of a crime needs to successfully claim crime victim status apart from enough influence to back up the claim. They reflect the basic connotations of the concept. The crime victim should preferably be weak, involved in a respectable activity when hit or heading for a non-blameable location. The accused perpetrator too must fit the preconceptions: have the upper hand, be unknown and unrelated to the victim, and generally describable in negative terms (Lindgren et al., 2001). To be hit by a crime, you neither need to be innocent nor weak, but criminologists find that non-aggressive women, children and people who have suffered a long time more easily get recognition as victims (Lamb, 1999: 115). The legal concepts do not exhaust all the potential everyday meanings of the concept, but the latter still influence who will, in practice, be counted as a victim.

Another focus of victimology has been the potential stigmatisation when the victim succeeds in getting recognised, an ambivalent loss of ascribed agency that opens up both for protection and for oppression. Feminism and victimology agree in the observation that female victims, to get recognised, must act in ways that preserve gender norms (Agevall, 2001: 75). Stigmatisation may turn back charges of responsibility to the victim: not for what he/she did, but for what he/she did not do or for what he/she is. People in the victim's environment want to define the victim as radically different, to exclude that the latter's fate could happen to themselves (see Leymann, 1986: 207; Lindgren, 2004: 29–30). Or simply, 'othering' is a way to escape the responsibility to offer support.

While victimology confronts the stereotype of the 'crime' victim with empirical evidence, feminist debates on victimhood do not challenge the concept of the victim as such. They rather just question its applicability to women.

To Describe and Construe

The discursive turn in social science has directed attention to how people are practically affected by socially-constructed labels, in daily life or in social

science. The textual obliteration of agency is sometimes treated as an obliteration in the absolute sense: people become passive when they are described as passive (e.g., Poluha, 2004: 15). The model of understanding behind this equalisation seems to have two basic strains. Firstly, others may usurp the agency of those seen as passive, arguing that they act on behalf of people not capable of acting themselves. The understanding of people as lacking power, agency and responsibility is a pretext for withdrawing their rights. Secondly, self-definitions affect people's own agency. Does the writer contribute to destroy the former?

The efficiency of discursive power in constructing the self of the subordinated person as powerless may overestimate both the repressive and the revolutionary power of the ideas of an elite. It exemplifies the type of stance it criticises: the subordinated are seen as passively accepting the definitions produced by those who have discursive power.

In the vivid debate on victimhood in American feminist writings, the idea of the 'victim' as a negative self-image, an identity, is very prominent. The ANV trope similarly suggests that victimhood is an essentialised aspect of somebody's identity. To be described or treated as a victim would be seen as involving a risk of permanently looking at yourself as a victim, rejecting responsibility for your situation and incurring blame on others. The notion of such 'victim mentality' is not entirely separate from another abhorrence of contemporary neoliberal discourse: aid-dependency. It is rarely problematised under which circumstances a person draws on actual situational experiences of victimhood or other people's perceptions to form such a self-image. The discourse refers rather to moral and philosophical considerations than to a safe empirical grounding.

The passivity implied by the core meaning of the concept 'victim' refers to the direct causality of the damage the victim suffers. The concept applies if the damaging act is not a well-justified revenge and if the victim is innocent of his own misfortune. The limits of this passivity are not clear-cut, neither in the various realities of victimisation, nor in the stereotyping of victimhood. A victim may make resistance (Agevall, 2001: 27), yet end up victimised. Forms of passivity may be actively chosen in order to minimise damage. Passivity, itself, may be a provocation. The victim may stand our as passive only compared to the active perpetrator. The passivity may only relate to the misfortune itself — like, for example, when a person is interrupted in her active work by the bullet of a sniper. The stereotype extends the dimension of passivity as if it was a general trait of the victim not only in the very situation of the victimisation, but also in subsequent moments, and not only in relation to causation of injury, but also, for example, in relation to resistance. The trope suggests that

'victimhood' and 'agency' are essential aspects by which persons can be characterised, rather than situational and relationally defined. A description of how somebody has undeservingly been subjected to maltreatment or misfortune is re-read as a signalising general and blameable lack of agency.

To understand the full implication of the ANV trope we, however, need to consider the semiotics of the word 'agency'.

The Concept of Agency

'Agency', as an important sociological concept, is said to have been launched by E. P. Thompson (1963). Discontent with seeing working-class consciousness as directly emerging from the logics of capitalism, Thompson argued for the importance of human agency and reflection. Since then, the concept of agency has become prominent in social science generally. As with many such terms, popularity engenders polysemy. The Oxford English Dictionary Online (Simpson and Weiner, 1989) offers a definition: "The faculty of an agent or of acting." Clarke (2003) combines this with what the dictionary says about 'faculty' and concludes, "Agency, in other words, may be defined as the capacity (in persons and things) through which something is created or done." This quote reflects the term´s basic ambiguity: it refers both to the basically human *ability and will to act freely* and to *effectively having an impact* on the world. (cf. Smith, 1999: 101)

Some authors, like Giddens (1979, 1993), build both these elements into their definition. 'Agency' for Giddens relates to the capacity to make appropriate choices of action within a particular spatio-temporal and culturally defined context, in a way always transformative of the world. He relates 'agency' to rationality, embodied human dispositions and knowledge about the structural environment. The potential of having an impact is implied and made irrelevant in relation to moral evaluation. 'Agency' is a facility used as soon as there is a choice.

In the literature theorising on 'agency', more narrow definitions are often used than those suggested by Giddens. Some researchers emphasise the imprint made by the action without implying intentions (see, for example, Asad in Mahmood, 1996; Ramphele, 1997: 115). Notable are those representing actor-network theory, where the term is applied also to non-reflecting 'agents', such as animals or objects (e.g., Callon, 1986). Others emphasise the action itself (Anderson, 1980: 19) and yet others stress the propensity to undertake conscious choices and goal-directed action (Halkier, 2004: 27). There is no consensus on 'agency' and little reason to expect the term to be clear when

used in relation to the ANV trope. Normative uses of the trope do not require that the author specifies his/her definition of 'agency' (or 'actor').

An analytical distinction between agency as efficient influence and agency as individual willingness to act is not always possible when agency is wielded on-behalf-of-others, often in collective form. The original intentions of individual actors may have been alienated or pass through links of representation or have been abstracted and objectified in texts (cf. Asad in Mahmood, 1996) 'Agency' definitions either explicitly based on or pre-assuming intentionality are, nevertheless, the most common ones within social science. They are the ones most readily infused with issues of accountability and responsibility, which fall out differently, depending on whether we talk about the propensity to act or the efficiency of action.

Ethics and morality can variously be based on intentions or 'attributable consequences' (Asad in Mahmood, 1996). Both are expressed in terms of causation, responsibility, and accountability. Like 'victimhood' and 'agency', these three terms are not used only in relation to specific acts, but as essentialising traits, assumedly characterising individuals or categories of people. That is, a person may not only be 'responsible, i.e., for collecting garbage' or 'responsible for the broken cup', but also 'a responsible person'.

Attributions and the Self

Liberal individualism puts on a person the charge to act, to be accountable for what has been done and having foresight in what to do. Agency, responsibility and accountability all primarily refer to the relation between a subject and a particular, historically or situationally contingent set of actions. The ANV-trope brings us away from seeing them as processual and situational to see them as personal, moral traits, a mistake close to the classic 'fundamental error of attribution' noted by social psychologists in the Heider tradition. These researchers argued that people tend to explain the behaviour of other people as expressions of their character, while they see their own behaviour as a reaction to constraints.

What is it then to write about somebody as an agent? 'Attribution theory' offers a clue. Basically, to write from the actor's own point of view, is to write about the situation of action as it is experienced by the actor in the moment of choice of action — thrown into the world and the stream of time in the way the individual always is according to Heidegger (1927). (Lamentably, accounts given afterwards are often the closest approximation that we can get to such an actor's meaning). To understand oneself as an actor is more seldom a matter of seeing action in terms of 'what person I am', but relates to solving a task in

a particular situation of constraints and opportunities (Heider, 1958; Jones et al., 1972; Weiner, 1986). Action-oriented research should thus emphasise how situational constraints are perceived rather than how action expresses identity.

A different elaboration from attribution theory has been made by those who argue that to improve behaviour, one needs to effect a cognitive change from 'external attributions' to 'internal attributions'. Alleged cultural differences in interpreting causation are part of a widely distributed discourse of psycho-cultural differences, which relate to a Western hailing of inner control as a tool for progress, a logic that resonates with Protestantism (see Mahler et al., 1981; Furnham and Procter, 1989; Carmona, 1998). People discussing internal and external attributions in relation to female sexual victimisation, however, see internal attributions as obstacles to emancipation rather than the key to change (Thomas and Kitzinger, 1997: 10; Flood, 1999). Stringer (op. cit.), discussing the feminist concepts of 'victims' and 'survivors', notes the affinity between 'self-blame' (a destructive retrospective stance) and 'taking personal responsibility for one's situation' (a liberating, future-oriented reclaim of agency). Worried by the similarity of the two notions in terms of putting all the responsibility on the individual, Stringer claims that they differ in that "....a 'survivor' is cognisant of her capacity for active resistance, and scripts her future in accord with this, whereas a 'victim' is not cognisant of her capacities and so scripts a passive future." Still, her emphasis is on inner constraints and capacities, not on how the victim could be empowered by an increased understanding of the nature of external constraints or factors of oppression.

The Gains of Victimhood

An entirely different strand of criticism against 'victim discourse' emanates from the standpoint that victimhood is nowadays increasingly exploited for personal and political reasons. If this is a real trend and not just a convenient social construction, it suggests that victimhood is not always humiliating. The eagerness with which victim status is taken up as a collective claim shows that the positive gains to make are often judged as bigger than the potential losses.

At the political level, those who win victim status may achieve a relocation of blame and gain moral authority and indemnification. To ask for victim status is not necessarily an abdication from agency, but can itself be a form of rewarding agency. Gilligan (2003: 32) offers a rather complicated argument about victimhood in Northern Ireland, where very different political actors claim to represent victims, appropriating the moral authority of the latter:

"The politics of victimhood suggest a vigorous contestation between political adversaries, not a diminished agency. On closer inspection however, the use of victimhood for political ends tends to support the argument that a diminished human agency underlies the peace process…" Gilligan's proposition is that victimhood has resonance with the Irish population, based on a widespread loss of effective' agency among the constituents.

Many inflamed debates over victim status relate to the questioning of other people's rights to the presumed gains. The claims of victim status in relation to World War II are still contested. Apart from the Jewish and Roma tragedy, various side stories attempt to evoke sympathy for other categories: Baltic leaders not wanting to be seen as accomplices to German invaders in the persecution of Jews but as suffering themselves from the occupation, German civilians claiming that they innocently suffered from the bomb-raids of the allied forces, etc. (Niven, 2006; Ther, 2006). In other cases, historical claims to victim status are criticised for being used as a generalised excuse for contemporary action, as in the case of Israel.

Some authors, like Kleinman, suggest that today's world sees an increasing trend to claim victim status (1997: 188–187). Kleinman emphasises that victimhood sells well as a medialised commodity. Flood (1999) argues for 'a general cultural shift, in which injustices and harms done to people increasingly are individualised and psychologised, especially through the language of therapy'.

In the French journal, *Le Monde*, a debate was triggered in 2004 when a young woman falsely claimed that she had been sexually harassed by racists. Like the attempts to escape responsibility for the Holocaust, this case illustrates how victimhood claims also may imply morally doubtable opportunities. French public intellectuals felt summoned to comment on contemporary trends to heroise victims in an all too insecure world and to always trace somebody to hold accountable. They linked these tendencies to the French institutionalisation of protection for crime victims since the mid-1980s, and to the emergence of collective movements to represent the victims of environmental and health scandals.

Structural Violence and Victimisation

Issues of uneven distribution of constraints and opportunities actualise another context in which the ANV trope is mobilised, apart from that of individual suffering and misfortune. In order to distinguish this context from the general discipline of victimology, Mc Leer (1998: 45) has coined the

expression 'radical victimology' for analyses that use the language of victimisation in relation to structural, institutionalised and less personalised oppression or domination. Following Galtung (1969), such analyses also occur under the heading of 'structural violence'. The concept 'structural victims' suggests a non-intentional, diffuse power or a system constraining the opportunities of the sufferer.

After the Tsunami of 2005, images were spread in the media of the global structures of rifts between continental shields. Unknown to many potential victims, these provide good metaphors for society's structures of vulnerability: regularities in international conventions and financial flows, national legal systems, the distribution of capital and means of production, cultural institutions, infrastructure and material topography. Smith (1999) talks about such structures as 'concrete abstractions' — abstract or invisible in their totality for people whose range of action they influence. Changes at the structural level may transform the individual's scope of action, without being open for inspection or interference, a point raised by Asad in his criticism of agency-oriented social science (see Mahmood, 1996). The structural level redistributes agency-as-efficient-influence, but does not necessarily affect the basic propensity to make reflected choices of action.

Analyses of structural violence and inequality have been criticised for not ascribing enough autonomous agency to subordinate classes. Smith (op. cit.: 89) quotes Roseberry (1993: 336) as stating that earlier scholars saw peasants as reactors to oppression rather than as protagonists and initiators, with their own forceful agency. In the discourse of 'not-victims-but-capable-agents', to describe injustices in structural terms is to put the agency of victims off the agenda, representing them as passive people who neither want to, nor are able to, do anything about their situation.

Criticism of 'victim discourse' often emphasises the tendency to homogenise inherent in structural analysis, said not to recognise the heterogeneity of lives and personal characteristics, strategies or modes of suffering (see, for example, Kleinman, 1997: 187; Harrison, 1995: 237). By suggesting enduring constraints on a super-individual level, one is held to essentialise the characteristics of the 'victims,' giving them all the associated connotations of passivity. Authors, like Gardner and Lewis (1996: 18), argue that, for example, Marxist dependency theory is flawed by its 'inability to deal with empirical variation'. Pottier, who holds that grand narratives of social science fail to describe the variations of real life, where people are sometimes victims, sometimes winners (1999: 132ff) identifies Shiva (1992), van der Ploeg (1990) and Meillassoux (1981) as part of a continued tradition: "All three opt for a broad 'passive victims' representation, thus denying the victims their social

differentiation and human agency . . . Are farmers totally powerless in the face of the homogenising activities of such trans-national bodies? Do they really engage with these global forces in a uniformly submissive manner? . . . Analyses which put all the emphasis on structural constraints at the cost of highlighting how farmers strategise to make the most of new opportunities have merit, but they are one-sided. Despite the formidable hurdles they encounter, small-scale farmers are not passive pawns at the mercy of globalising forces."

Structural models of differences in power and agency resonate with other dichotomies where the subordinated status is associated with passivity. Whatever is stated about a category of people traps us in the quagmires of essentialism. The ANV trope itself is subject to the same risk. Linked to emancipation politics, it is usually phrased in terms of some homogenised social category, such as 'women', 'slaves', 'peasants' or 'refugees'. To essentialise a social category not as victims, but as agents, would be no ethical problem unless for the implication that there are counter-categories that do not live up to this qualification. One may also ask whether it is necessarily true that to generalise about constraints makes the personal qualities of the agents acting within them less visible. Instead it enables the researcher to see the variation between agents in terms of the choices they make, rather than in terms of their relative degrees of inherent agency.

One issue that seems to trouble some analysts is how far structural victimisation can be used as an apology for individual behaviour. This is raised by Gilligan (2003: 32) in relation to the Northern Irish FAIR: "The argument is that terrorists are victims of circumstance, and have experienced suffering in their own way." The implication is that these people are not accountable for their actions, "the fact is they chose to go out and murder, they chose to torture and maim. Their actions are not excusable on the grounds that they are 'victims' too." Bourgouis (1995: 53, 119) addresses a similar problem: "From the safety of a desk or a reading chair, the Puerto Rican population's history of economic dislocation, political domination, cultural oppression and large-scale migration easily accounts for why street culture in el Barrio might be so brutally self-destructive . . ." Yet, he states, the violent behaviour of his informants could not be excused by any amount of 'historical apology' and 'structural victimisation', nor would they themselves find themselves exempted from individual accountability. They have not 'passively accepted their structural victimisation', but in searching to handle their marginalisation, 'become the actual agents administering their own destruction and their community's suffering' (p. 143). In making these distance-taking declarations, Bourgouis actualises two other aspects of victim discourse. To be a victim may be a claim not only to be innocent in the instance of victimisation, but also to be held

irresponsible for later acts seen as done in reaction to victimisation. Like in the case of crime victims, structural victimhood raises false expectations of general innocence: but suffering people are not immune from contributing to their own suffering (cf. p. 354, fn 19), neither to adding to the suffering of others, a point also made by Kleinman (1997: 187).

Narratives of structural victimisation present other types of relation between blame and responsibility than stories of individual victimisation by identifiable perpetrators. The strength of classical identity and class politics is their capacity to deflect the passivising effects inherent in self-blame. They encourage to action by translating personal experience to something more general, a fact ironically disregarded by those who suggest that shared stories of victimisation tend to subvert agency.

The Cultural Basis of the Trope?

To what extent is the morality on which the ANV trope is based universal or culturally and historical contingent? The fact that it is rarely made explicit suggests a taken-for-grantedness.

I have not found any systematic cross-cultural comparison of how people evaluate victims of misfortune, or even if the term is universally translatable. The problem of blaming and devaluating victims is often presented as a general human one, related to beliefs in a just world, the need to minimise cognitive dissonance etc. Sunstein (1991: 164) discusses how such factors influence how victims are perceived. The victim can be criticised for exaggerated or false claims, more passivity than the situation demands, signals of acquiescence or even invitations to abuse. Sunstein mentions how people unjustifiably perceive misfortunes as having been more predictable than they were, in fact, blaming the victims for a lack of foresight.

Lacking substantial evidence on the comparative semantics of victimhood and lack of agency, it is still relevant to note the links between the ANV trope and culturally contingent strands of contemporary thinking in, for example, pop psychology, therapy and commercialised management ideology. For example, the ideology of 'positive thinking' launched by Peale (1952) has had a lasting impact on the commodified messages in managerial consultancy and education. It vividly expresses the conflation of will and effectiveness that the term 'agency' entails. Asad (op. cit.) and Rose (1999: 268) see the contemporary obsession with agency as closely linked to neo-liberalism and an over-belief in the efficiency of a strong will. In a criticism of how a similar agency-focussed discourse has been used in slavery scholarship where it marginalises other

versions of human emancipation, Johnson (2003) too links the emphasis on agency as defining of 'humanity' with liberal individualism.

Conclusion

The moral messages implied by the 'not victims-but agents' trope are not clearer than its basic terms. First, there is the morality of representation. Most simply, the trope tells us not to essentialise passivity but to write about our study objects as agents. We may read 'agents' either as intentional agents, or as people who have efficiently had an impact. The rejected term 'victims' is equally ambiguous. Do we talk about people hampered by constraints, struck by accidents or being targets of malevolent action, or about people passivised by 'victim mentality'? The trope conveys the wish to avoid an expected sense of humiliation for the object of description and adding to a passivising self-image that might reinforce reality.

Yet, while the ambitions that govern the use of the 'Agents Not Victims' trope are well-intended, the trope stands for a less visible layer of questionable morality. It tells us that the value of the described people *depends* upon them being prepared to act, or on acting with an impact. The ANV trope is a conventionalised rhetorical move that reiterates and reproduces one particular moral stance, but without supportive discussion as if a consensus on the issue is self-evident. In denying that category X are 'victims', the trope suggests that there may be other people (Y, Z, etc.) who do not live up to the standards, and that being passive or victim is contemptible, regardless of causes.

Are there really people who merit the description 'victims', who are they and are *any* people in need of protection contemptible? A more human approach is to see preparedness to act appropriately out of one's perceived situation as an (in principle) universal human trait, while the opportunities to achieve an impact are unequally distributed. Even if by repeating the trope one would be able to convince the audience that a particular group X are, in fact, prepared to act and/or do have an impact, the very repetition implies a reinforcement of norms questioning the universality of a human will to act.

This aspect of the usage of the trope exemplifies the unintended consequences of action (Giddens, 1979: 7, 69ff). A conscious rhetorical move, intended to discursively emancipate group X thus at the same time reproduces its own silent premises (cf. Fairclough, 1989: 41). Instead of undermining the interpretation of victimhood as shameful, the ANV trope reinforces it (cf. Kelly et al., 1996: 92). It celebrates the unspecified category of action. 'Agency' becomes an unmarked category validated as good *per se* disregarding

whether it contributes to a positive change in conditions, maintains *status quo* or incurs damage and suffering to others. In contrast it is implied that constraints necessarily reflect badly on the character of the constrained, and that weakness in itself is contemptible. The users of the trope contribute to undermining collective engagement and solidarity by blaming the victims.

It is difficult for social science to find linguistic expressions that do not imply extra-scientific assumptions and to handle issues of power, agency and moral accountability. We must be able to talk about the impact of structural patterns on the scope of people's action without being seen as questioning their preparedness to act within the framework of possibilities. We must make clear distinctions between agency in the sense of efficient impact and in the sense of willingness-to-act, not to reread the effects of constraints as individual shortcomings of character. Rather than to object to those who describe structural constraints, we need scepticism against all arguments that withdraw constraints from our focus of attention, and against the myths of science and policy discourse that question people's wish to be active for and by themselves.

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