

Victim Blaming

The Why, the How and its Outcomes



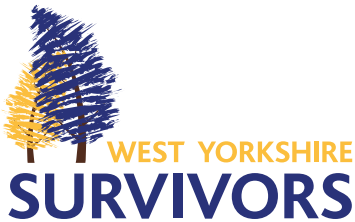
ben's place

SPECIALIST SUPPORT
FOR MALE SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVORS

Introduction

Victim blaming has been happening since at least the beginning of recorded history but has only recently been identified as a dynamic used to empower the criminal and maintain the status quo.

Victim blaming occurs when the victim of a crime or abuse is held partly or entirely responsible for the actions committed against them.



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“Boots and all...”

Why Do People Blame Victims?

There are a number of reasons why people choose to blame victims for the crimes that have happened to them. These reasons stem from misconceptions about victims, perpetrators, and the nature of violent acts. Victims are sometimes wrongfully portrayed as passive individuals who seek out and submit to the violence they endure. Offenders are seen as hapless individuals who are compelled to act violently by forces they cannot control. The most popular reasons for blaming victims include belief in a just world, attribution error, and invulnerability theory:

Just World Hypothesis

The just world hypothesis is based on an individual's belief that the world is a safe, just place where people get what they deserve. Many people prefer to believe that the social system that affects them is fair, legitimate, and justifiable. When an individual has such a strong belief it can be challenged when they encounter victims of random misfortunes, such as sexual violence victims. If people perceive themselves as good people then good things will happen to them, whereas if a person is perceived to be bad then bad things will happen to them. Moreover, this hypothesis presents the world as a safe and protected place even when in the face of hardship.

Literature on the just world hypothesis also states that people judge the harshness of events as a function of harm caused.

Thus, if a victim is not harmed in a severe manner, then what happened to them can be seen as an accident. However, as the severity of harm increases, the more people begin to think that "this could happen to me". Therefore, blaming the victim for what has happened to them is a way for them to cope and restore faith in the world.

Many people may be reluctant to give up their belief that the world is just. When someone has such a strong belief they may try to eliminate the suffering of innocent victims or they will blame them for their misfortune. It is impossible to reverse acts of sexual violence and the suffering of its victims, therefore blaming the victim is often common. That way, one who believes in a just world can maintain their belief because there is no longer an innocent, suffering victim, but someone who “deserves” their misfortune.

Blaming the victim maintains beliefs of personal responsibility and controllability over social outcomes. Those who believe in a just world tend to believe that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. Therefore, when people with these beliefs view victims they believe that their victimization was caused through some fault of their own.

Attribution Error

According to Kelley and Heider there are two kinds of attributions, internal and external. Individuals make internal attributions when they recognise that a person’s personal characteristics are the cause of their actions or situation, whereas external attributions have individuals identify the environment and circumstances as the cause for a person’s behaviour.

Attribution error occurs when individuals overemphasize personal characteristics and devalue environmental characteristics when judging others. This results in victim blaming as people view the individual victim as partially responsible for what happened to them and ignore situational causes. So-called “internal failings” take precedence over situational contributors on the part of the subject being judged.

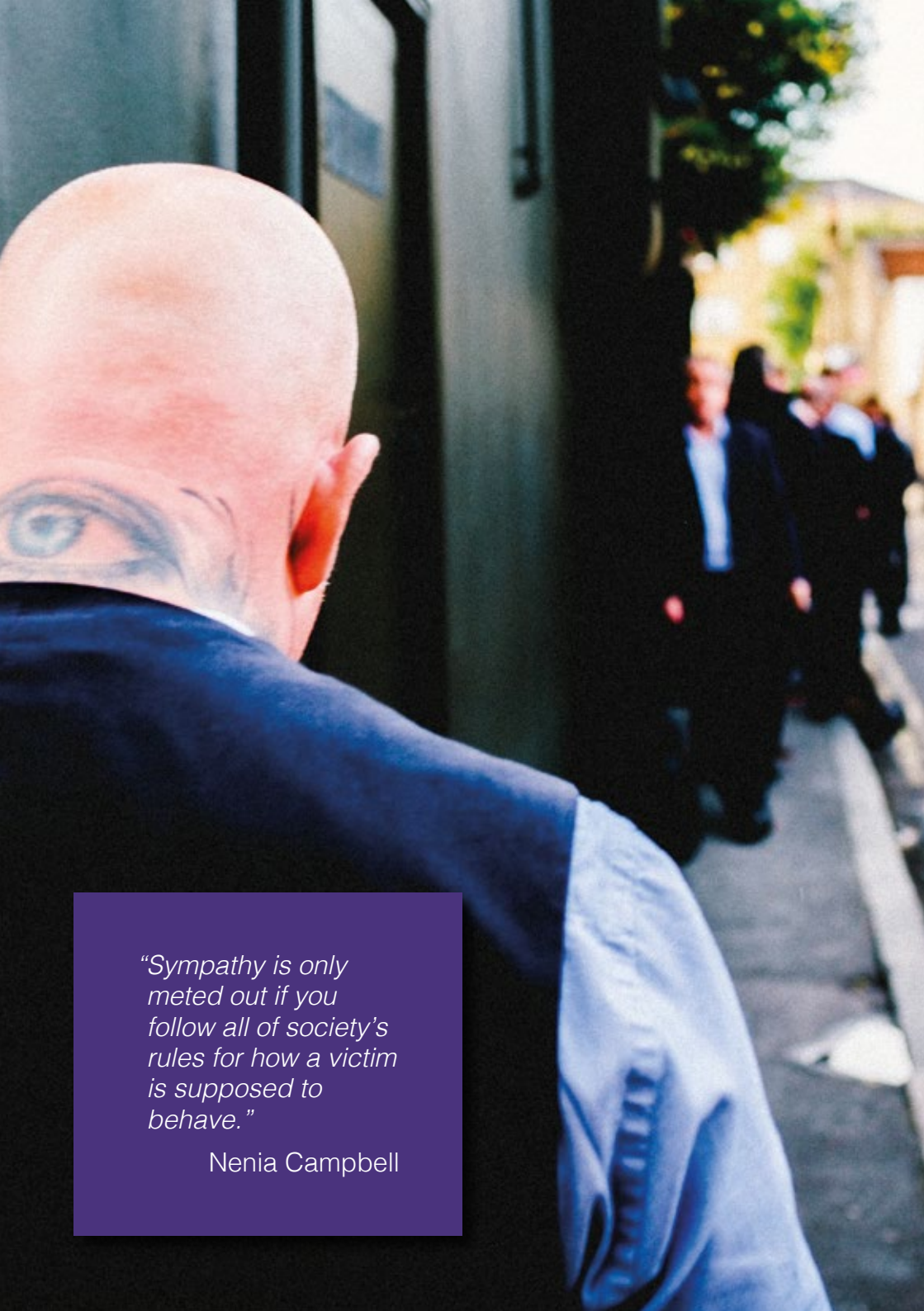
Thus, it is easier for a person to attribute others’ behaviours or situations to individual characteristics because it is easier to produce an explanation this way. In contrast, people may have the propensity to attribute their own failure to environmental attributes and their own success to personal attributes. Further, coping with victimization can be rather difficult. When a victim of crime is blamed for what has happened to them it can affect their ability to move on afterwards.

Invulnerability Theory

The literature on invulnerability theory and attitudes towards victims shows that there is a propensity for others to blame the victim to protect their own feelings of invulnerability.

Invulnerability theory is based on people blaming the victim in order to feel safe themselves. Even friends and family members of crime victims may blame the victim in order to reassure themselves. A common statement may sound like “He was raped because he’s gay or not a ‘real’ man.” “Wouldn’t happen to me as I’m not gay and everyone knows I’m a ‘real’ man so I won’t be raped.” The theory states that victims are a reminder of our own vulnerability.

Individuals do not want to consider the possibility of losing control over their lives or bodies; deciding that a victim brought on the attack themselves creates a false sense of security. This reassures people that as long as they don’t do whatever the victim was doing at the time of the attack they will be invulnerable.



“Sympathy is only meted out if you follow all of society’s rules for how a victim is supposed to behave.”

Nenia Campbell

The How

Myth: Men can't be sexually assaulted.

Reality: Men are sexually assaulted. Any man can be sexually assaulted regardless of size, strength, appearance or sexual orientation.

Myth: Only gay men are sexually assaulted.

Reality: Heterosexual, gay and bisexual men are equally likely to be sexually assaulted. Being sexually assaulted has nothing to do with your current or future sexual orientation. Your sexuality has no more to do with being raped than being robbed.

Myth: Only gay men sexually assault other men.

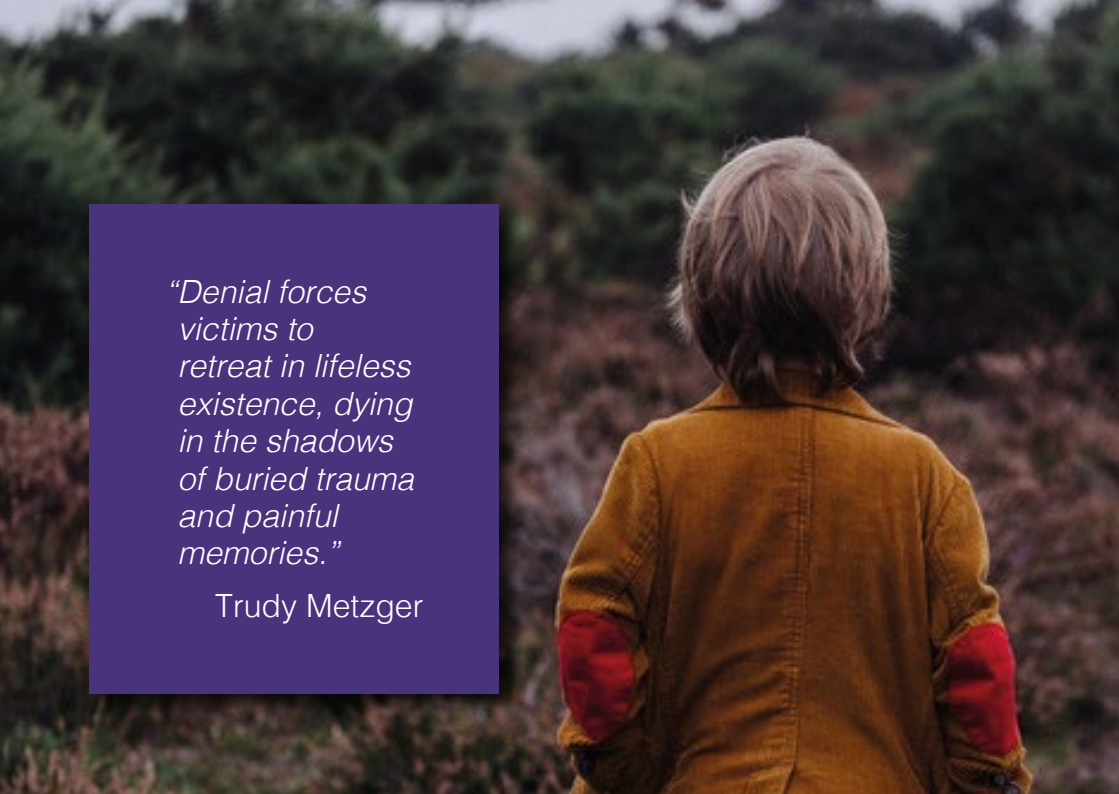
Reality: Most men who sexually assault other men identify as heterosexual. This fact helps to highlight another reality that sexual assault is about violence, anger and control over another person, not lust or sexual attraction.

Myth: Men cannot be sexually assaulted by women.

Reality: Although the majority of perpetrators are male (97-98%), women can also sexually assault men.

Myth: Erection or ejaculation during sexual assault means you “really wanted it” or consented to it.

Reality: Erection or ejaculation are physiological responses that may result from mere physical contact or even extreme stress. These responses do not imply that you wanted or enjoyed the assault and do not indicate anything about your sexual orientation. Some rapists are aware how erections and ejaculations can confuse a victim of sexual assault and this motivates them to manipulate their victims to the point of erections or ejaculation to increase their feelings of control and to discourage reporting of the crime.



“Denial forces victims to retreat in lifeless existence, dying in the shadows of buried trauma and painful memories.”

Trudy Metzger

Myth: I asked for it.

Reality: No one ever wants or invites sexual assault. It doesn't matter what men look like, how they dress, where they go or live, how old they are or whether they are married or not. Sexual assault is not a sexual experience. It is an act of violence that violates a man's sense of personal safety and control over his life. It is often a violent, brutal and terrifying assault which may have long-lasting effects on his physical, psychological and emotional health, whether or not it involves physical violence.

Myth: Most rapists are strangers.

Reality: Most men know who their attacker is in some way. Often she/he is well known to them. They may be a friend, neighbour or boss or a relative, father, uncle, brother or ex-partner. They may be a tradesperson or a professional, e.g. a doctor, teacher, psychiatrist, police officer or public servant.

Myth: Rapists aren't like ordinary people.

Reality: Most rapists are ordinary people, even though stories about assaults by violent psychotic people are given a lot of space in the press and people often believe that rapists are sick or crazy.

Myth: Some people can't rape.

Reality: A person's sexual potency and sexual preference does not affect their ability to rape. Sexual assault can be committed by using fingers or objects such as sticks, marker pens or bottles. Young people and old people do rape young and old people.

Myth: Males who are sexually abused will become sexual abusers.

Reality: The vast majority of males who have experienced childhood abuse or adult rape do **not** go on to sexually offend.

Myth: Rape in couples does not exist.

Reality: Rape in marriage or a relationship does occur. Through physical, psychological or emotional coercion some men are forced by their partners to engage in unwanted sexual acts, including oral or anal sex. A spouse or common law partner can be charged with the rape of their partner. The law recognizes that a spouse is not the property of their partner, to be used sexually by them.

Myth: Men who are raped are scarred for life.

Reality: Men can and do survive sexual assault physically and emotionally, and in the process they can gain strength and self-respect. This myth concerns society's tendency to blame the victim and becomes reflected in how men then feel about themselves.

It is important to remember that it is the perpetrator who is to blame.



“Viciousness is part of the world we live in, some of us choose to ignore it with the rationalisation of wanting only positivity to flow our way. How selfish we have become! That the pain of others has become a hindrance to the fulfilment of our positive selves.”

Aysha Taryam

Outcomes

Perpetrators, bystanders, society and even some victims practise and enforce victim blaming. Perpetrators blame their victims to justify their actions in order to avoid punishment and maintain freedom to abuse in the future. A perpetrator's justification for their actions and continued abuse appears to stem from a sense of entitlement and their desire to have power over others. Victim blaming is simply an easy way out to avoid consequences of wrongdoing and shift the blame.

Men who have been sexually assaulted may see themselves as "soiled" or "damaged property", whilst society is likely to see them as weak. Even though such attitudes are changing, men may still feel ashamed or guilty, and people may blame them for what happened.

This myth is hard to break because it is so engrained in people's minds. However, it can be broken.

“When the Japanese mend broken objects they aggrandize the damage by filling the cracks with gold, because they believe that when something’s suffered damage and has a history it becomes more beautiful.”

Barbara Bloom



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**Adapted from the following sources:

The Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime

The Psychologist (1998) Perpetuating rape-supportive culture

Talking about rape

South Eastern CASA (www.secasa.com.au/pages/myths-about-male-rape/)