

From Victims to Victimizers: Exploring the Psychological and Sociological Dynamics

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In the complex interplay of human behavior, the transition from victims to victimizers presents a profound psychological and sociological phenomenon that raises critical questions about the nature of power, control, and identity. This paper delves into several theoretical frameworks to explore how individuals and groups, once subjected to oppression or trauma, may adopt the very behaviors that victimized them. From the Cycle of Abuse, which elucidates the repetitive nature of violent behaviors across generations, to Cognitive Dissonance Theory, which explains how internal conflicts can lead to justifications for harmful actions, these theories offer insights into the mechanisms driving this transformation. By examining Social Learning Theory, Identity Theory, the Power Threat Hypothesis, and more, we gain a nuanced understanding of the factors that influence groups to shift from oppressed to oppressors. This exploration not only enhances our understanding of human behavior but also informs the development of interventions aimed at breaking the cycle of victimization.

Keywords: Cycle of Abuse, Victim to Victimizer Dynamics, Social Learning Theory, Identity Theory, Power Threat Hypothesis, Cognitive Dissonance Theory.

Introduction

The transformation from being victims to becoming victimizers is a profound and complex psychological and sociological phenomenon. This shift, wherein individuals or groups who have experienced oppression or trauma begin to exhibit behaviors that oppress or traumatize others, highlights a critical aspect of human behavior dynamics. Understanding this transition is not merely an academic exercise; it is crucial for developing effective interventions in social policy, mental health, and conflict resolution. It sheds light on the cyclical nature of violence and the deep-seated impact of trauma that can transcend generations and perpetuate a legacy of suffering.

This paper will explore several theoretical frameworks that help elucidate how and why this transformation occurs. Among them, the **Cycle of Abuse** theory suggests that behaviors learned through experiencing abuse can be perpetuated by the victim in new contexts. **Social Learning Theory** posits that aggressive behaviors are learned through observing and imitating others, particularly influential role models. **Victim to Victimizer Dynamics** explores the psychological shift that can occur when a victim of oppression gains power. **Identity Theory** reflects on how group identities formed around victimization can lead to aggressive assertions of power when the status quo changes. **Power Threat Hypothesis** considers how perceived threats to newfound power can trigger oppressive actions by previously victimized groups. Finally, **Cognitive Dissonance Theory** examines how holding conflicting beliefs can lead to rationalizing or adopting behaviors that victimize others in order to resolve internal psychological conflict.

By examining these theories, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the transition from victims to victimizers, offering insights that could inform strategies to break this cycle and promote lasting peace and reconciliation.

Cycle of Abuse

The "Cycle of Abuse" theory, first conceptualized by psychologist Lenore Walker in the late 1970s, provides a framework to understand how patterns of abusive behavior are transmitted and repeated, both within individual relationships and across generations. This theory posits that abuse operates in a cyclical pattern, typically characterized by three phases: the tension-building phase, the acute or crisis phase, and the honeymoon phase. Over time, this cycle can escalate in severity, leading victims to become increasingly entangled in abusive dynamics.

Tension-Building Phase: Tensions increase, communication breaks down, and the victim feels the need to placate the abuser. The victim may feel fearful and minor incidents can escalate.

Acute or Crisis Phase: This is characterized by outbursts of violent, abusive incidents. The abuser attempts to dominate their victim, using physical, emotional, or sexual abuse.

Honeymoon Phase: After the abuse, there is a period of calm where the abuser may apologize, give gifts, and promise to change. This phase often renews the victim's hope for resolution and a non-abusive future, which can make it difficult to leave the relationship.

The transition from being a victim to becoming an abuser can be influenced by this cycle for several reasons:

- **Normalization of Violence:** Individuals who grow up in an environment where abuse is normalized may learn to replicate these behaviors, believing them to be acceptable methods for handling stress or conflict.
- **Learned Helplessness:** Victims often experience learned helplessness, feeling powerless to change their situation. If they find themselves in a position of power later, they may exert control over others as a means to regain a sense of empowerment.

- **Emotional Regulation:** Victims of abuse might not learn healthy ways to cope with anger or frustration. This lack of emotional regulation can lead to abusive behavior when they encounter stressful situations.

Historical Examples and Studies:

- **Intergenerational Transmission:** Studies have shown that children who witness domestic violence or are victims of abuse are more likely to engage in such behavior as adults. A seminal study by Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) highlighted the cycle of violence within homes, noting that children who are abused or witness abuse are more likely to consider violence as a normal part of relationships.
- **Cultural and Societal Impact:** In larger societal contexts, groups or nations that have experienced colonial oppression, systemic racism, or mass trauma (such as Indigenous communities in North America or populations in post-colonial nations) may internalize violence experienced historically. Over time, this can manifest in higher rates of domestic and community violence.

Understanding the Cycle of Abuse helps in developing interventions aimed at breaking the cycle. This involves addressing underlying issues such as trauma, providing education on healthy relationship dynamics, and ensuring that individuals have access to mental health support. These efforts are crucial in preventing the transition from victim to victimizer and in fostering healthier interpersonal and social relationships.

Victim to Victimizer Dynamics

The psychological transformation from a victim to a victimizer is a complex process influenced by a combination of personal, social, and psychological factors. This dynamic is often observed in individuals who have endured significant trauma or abuse and subsequently exhibit similar abusive

behaviors towards others. This section explores the underlying psychological motivations for this transformation and discusses relevant psychological research and case studies.

Psychological Motivations

1. **Desire for Power and Control:** One of the primary motivations for victims becoming victimizers is the desire to regain control over their lives. Trauma and abuse can leave individuals feeling powerless and vulnerable. In an attempt to overcome these feelings, individuals may exert control over others, mirroring the dynamics of their own experiences of being controlled.
2. **Identification with the Aggressor:** This is a concept from psychoanalysis where victims unconsciously adopt the traits or behaviors of their aggressors. Originally described by Anna Freud, this process is seen as a defense mechanism where the victim believes that adopting the aggressive traits will protect them from further harm.
3. **Reenactment of Trauma:** Victims may reenact their trauma, where they switch roles from the victim to the aggressor. This can be a subconscious attempt to gain a sense of mastery over their past experiences by replaying the trauma with reversed roles. This behavior is often discussed in the context of "trauma bonding" and "cycle of violence."
4. **Social Learning Theory:** Albert Bandura's theory posits that people learn behavior through observation and imitation. If individuals observe that aggressive or abusive behavior is an effective way of gaining respect or compliance, they may mimic these behaviors, especially if they have not been exposed to healthier models of conflict resolution.

Case Studies and Research Support

- **Childhood Abuse and Adult Criminality:** Research has shown a correlation between childhood abuse and adult criminal behavior. A

study by Widom and Maxfield (2001) found that children who were abused or neglected were significantly more likely to be arrested as juveniles and adults. This research supports the idea that early exposure to violence and abuse can lead to similar behaviors later in life.

- **The Stanford Prison Experiment:** This famous psychological study led by Philip Zimbardo in the 1970s demonstrated how ordinary people could adopt abusive behaviors when placed in positions of authority within a prison setting. This experiment highlights how situational dynamics and perceived power can influence individuals to engage in cruel and abusive actions.
- **Bullying Behavior in Schools:** Studies on bullying behavior show that children who are bullied are more likely to become bullies themselves. A longitudinal study by Sourander et al. (2007) found that being bullied at an early age was associated with later bullying behavior, suggesting a cycle of victimization and aggression.

Implications for Therapy and Prevention

Understanding the dynamics of victims becoming victimizers is crucial for developing effective therapeutic and preventative interventions. Strategies such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), and trauma-informed care are essential in helping individuals process their traumas healthily and learn more adaptive coping mechanisms. Moreover, educational programs that promote empathy, resilience, and positive role models are vital in breaking the cycle of abuse and violence.

By addressing both the psychological impacts of trauma and the social environments that foster aggressive behaviors, interventions can be designed to reduce the likelihood of victims turning into victimizers, promoting healthier communities and relationships.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory, developed by psychologist Albert Bandura, posits that people learn new behaviors by observing and imitating the actions of others, particularly those they view as models. This theory emphasizes the role of observational learning, imitation, and modeling in acquiring both functional and dysfunctional behaviors. According to this perspective, victimizing behaviors can be learned from the environment where individuals observe such actions being rewarded or going unpunished.

Mechanisms of Social Learning Theory

1. **Observation:** Individuals observe the behaviors of role models in their environment, which can include parents, peers, media figures, and others.
2. **Imitation:** Observers imitate the behaviors they have seen, especially if those behaviors appear to result in outcomes they desire.
3. **Reinforcement:** Behaviors are more likely to be repeated if they are followed by rewards or if they effectively remove undesirable outcomes (e.g., using aggression to avoid a threat).
4. **Modeling:** Through repeated observation and reinforcement, individuals learn and internalize specific behaviors as models for dealing with similar situations in the future.

Examples from Research and Sociocultural Contexts

- **Media Influence:** Research has shown that exposure to violent media (such as television, video games, and movies) can increase aggressive behavior in children and adolescents. For example, a meta-analysis by Anderson and Bushman (2001) demonstrated a consistent relationship between violent video game play and increases in aggressive behavior, thoughts, and affect.
- **Family Environment:** Studies have highlighted how aggressive behaviors can be learned within the family setting. Children who observe their parents engaging in violent or aggressive acts are more

likely to adopt these behaviors themselves. Patterson's Coercive Family Process (1982) describes how aggressive behaviors are transmitted within the family through coercive interactions.

- **Gang Violence:** In sociocultural contexts where gang violence is prevalent, young individuals often learn violent behaviors by observing and imitating senior gang members. These behaviors are reinforced by the status and protection that membership confers, as noted in research on gang dynamics and youth violence in urban settings.
- **Bullying in Schools:** Observational learning plays a crucial role in the development of bullying behaviors among students. Studies have shown that children and adolescents who observe their peers being rewarded for bullying (e.g., gaining social status or dominating others) are more likely to engage in bullying themselves.

Implications for Prevention and Intervention

Understanding the role of social learning in the acquisition of victimizing behaviors informs prevention and intervention strategies. Programs that aim to reduce violence and aggressive behaviors can benefit from:

- **Promoting Positive Role Models:** Introducing and highlighting positive role models who demonstrate non-aggressive ways of handling conflicts can help reshape norms and expectations about behavior.
- **Media Literacy Education:** Teaching children and adolescents to critically assess media content and understand the consequences of violence can mitigate the impact of violent media exposure.
- **Changing Reinforcement Contingencies:** In environments like schools and families, changing the reinforcement contingencies—by rewarding positive, prosocial behaviors and applying consistent consequences for aggressive acts—can alter behavioral patterns.
- **Community Programs:** Implementing community-based programs that provide youth with safe venues for interaction and learning

positive social skills can reduce the appeal of negative behaviors learned through observation in less constructive environments.

Social Learning Theory offers a framework for understanding how behaviors are acquired and maintained within a social context, emphasizing the importance of modeling and the environment in shaping individual behavior.

Identity Theory

Identity theory in sociology emphasizes the role of self-concept and social identity in shaping individual behavior and group dynamics. According to this theory, an individual's identity is formed through the roles they assume in society, and these roles are influenced by the expectations and norms associated with their social groups. When it comes to oppressed groups gaining power, identity theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how shifts in power can lead to aggressive behaviors.

Identity Formation and Oppressed Groups

1. **Role Salience and Identity Shifts:** For individuals in oppressed groups, certain aspects of their identity—such as their ethnic, racial, or religious identity—may become particularly salient due to their experiences of discrimination and oppression. When these individuals or groups gain power, there is often a significant shift in their social roles and how they perceive their identity in relation to others. This shift can lead to a reassessment of their group's norms and values, sometimes emphasizing more aggressive stances as a form of reassertion or compensation for past injustices.
2. **In-group Solidarity and Out-group Hostility:** Identity theory also discusses the formation of in-group solidarity as a response to oppression, which can strengthen group cohesion. However, this solidarity can sometimes translate into hostility towards out-groups,

especially if these out-groups are perceived as former oppressors or current threats. The clear demarcation between 'us' and 'them' can exacerbate tensions and lead to aggressive intergroup relations.

3. **Power Dynamics and Social Change:** As oppressed groups move into positions of power, the dynamics of their social identity can lead to significant changes in how power is exercised. Historical grievances and a strong collective memory of oppression can motivate leaders and group members to adopt aggressive policies or behaviors, partly in anticipation of resistance or backlash from traditional power holders.

Sociological Perspectives on Group Identity Dynamics

- **Symbolic Interactionism:** This perspective highlights how social interactions shape identity. For previously oppressed groups, interactions as power holders can redefine their social roles and expectations, potentially leading to aggressive behaviors if these roles are framed around conflict and dominance.
- **Social Identity Theory:** Closely related to identity theory, social identity theory explains how a person's self-concept is based on their perceived membership in social groups. It suggests that groups in power may engage in practices that enhance their status relative to others as a way to improve their self-image.
- **Conflict Theory:** This theory suggests that societal conflicts often arise when dominant groups attempt to maintain their status and resources, and previously oppressed groups challenge this dominance. The rise to power can lead to aggressive behaviors if these groups perceive that maintaining their new status requires assertive or aggressive actions.

Impact on Intergroup Relations

Understanding the dynamics of identity within formerly oppressed groups helps explain why transitions in power can sometimes lead to tension and conflict. Aggressive behaviors may be seen as both a defensive mechanism

and a means of establishing a new societal order. Sociological interventions, therefore, often focus on promoting inclusive identities that encompass broader societal goals rather than narrow group interests.

Effective approaches might involve fostering intergroup dialogue, promoting narratives that highlight shared values and common goals, and implementing policies that ensure equitable distribution of resources across different societal groups. These strategies can help mitigate the aggressive tendencies associated with shifts in power and identity among formerly oppressed groups, aiming for a more cohesive and peaceful social fabric.

Power Threat Hypothesis

The Power Threat Hypothesis is a sociological theory that examines how the perceptions of threat influence the behaviors of dominant groups towards minorities or emerging power groups. This theory posits that when dominant groups perceive their social, economic, or political power as being threatened by the rise of a minority or historically less powerful group, they may respond with aggressive or suppressive actions to maintain their dominance.

Relevance to Groups Transitioning from Victims to Oppressors

In the context of groups transitioning from being victims to becoming potential oppressors, the Power Threat Hypothesis is particularly relevant. As previously oppressed groups gain power—whether through demographic shifts, economic successes, or political reforms—the established dominant groups might perceive these gains as direct threats to their own status and control. This perceived threat can lead to a backlash where the now dominant group uses its newfound power aggressively to consolidate its position and suppress any potential reassertion of control by the former oppressors.

Historical and Contemporary Instances

1. **Post-Reconstruction Southern United States:** After the American Civil War, during Reconstruction, African Americans began to gain political power in the southern United States. This shift threatened the previously uncontested dominance of white Southerners, who responded with Jim Crow laws and the establishment of racially oppressive practices to curtail the political and social freedoms of African Americans.
2. **Rwanda Pre-Genocide:** In Rwanda, the Tutsi minority was initially perceived as more powerful during colonial rule, leading to their marginalization by the majority Hutus when they came to power. The shift in power heightened ethnic tensions and fears of Tutsi re-domination, contributing to the genocide against the Tutsi population by the Hutu-led government in 1994.
3. **Xenophobia in South Africa:** In post-apartheid South Africa, the influx of migrants from other African countries has sometimes been perceived as a threat by the local populace, leading to xenophobic attacks. These attacks can be seen as an aggressive attempt by local South Africans to assert control over economic resources and job opportunities, which they feel are being usurped by immigrants.
4. **Brexit and the Rise of Nationalism in the UK:** The referendum for the UK to leave the European Union was partially driven by a perceived threat from increasing European integration and migration. Some Britons felt that their cultural identity and economic control were being undermined by EU policies, leading to a rise in nationalist and sometimes xenophobic sentiments as a form of backlash.

The Power Threat Hypothesis underscores the importance of understanding the dynamics of perceived threats and power shifts in societal conflicts. Recognizing these dynamics can inform policies and interventions aimed at mitigating aggressive responses by dominant groups and supporting more peaceful and constructive methods of integrating rising groups into the societal fabric. This approach not only helps in reducing conflict but also in promoting a more inclusive and equitable society.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive Dissonance Theory, formulated by Leon Festinger in 1957, describes the psychological discomfort experienced when an individual holds contradictory beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors. This discomfort leads individuals to seek consistency among their cognitions, which can involve changing beliefs, acquiring new information, or altering behaviors.

Cognitive Dissonance in Victims Turning into Victimizers

When individuals who have been victims of abuse or oppression find themselves in situations where they can exert power over others, cognitive dissonance can play a significant role in how they rationalize their actions. If their self-concept is that of a victim, harming others conflicts with this view, creating dissonance. To resolve this discomfort, they might alter their perception either of their own actions (seeing them as justified or necessary) or of their victims (viewing them as deserving of the treatment).

Psychological Research and Real-Life Examples

1. **Former Victims as Aggressors in the Military:** Research on military units with histories of being oppressed or victimized (such as those composed of former prisoners of war or oppressed ethnic groups) sometimes demonstrates that these units can be particularly harsh when they come into power. For example, studies of behavior change in soldiers who were previously POWs have shown that they may justify aggressive behavior as a pre-emptive measure against potential threats.
2. **Abusive Parents Who Were Abused as Children:** Numerous studies in developmental psychology have found that parents who experienced abuse as children are more likely to abuse their own children. Cognitive dissonance theory explains part of this cycle, as these individuals might justify their harsh parenting by altering their beliefs about discipline and what is 'necessary' for child-rearing,

thereby resolving the dissonance between their past victim experiences and their current actions.

3. **Justifications for Harsh Criminal Justice Policies:** In societies that have experienced high crime rates or terrorism, victims of such crimes can sometimes be the most vocal proponents of strict or even harsh punitive measures. They may resolve cognitive dissonance by framing these measures as essential for security and justice, aligning their victim identity with a supporter of strong law enforcement to maintain consistency in their beliefs.
4. **Political Repression by Formerly Oppressed Groups:** Historical instances where formerly oppressed or colonized groups come into power and then engage in political repression or authoritarian practices offer broader examples. For instance, some revolutionary leaders justify repressive measures against dissenters by framing these actions as necessary to protect the revolution or to prevent the return of the oppressive conditions they once fought against.

Implications for Therapy and Social Policy

Understanding cognitive dissonance in the context of victims becoming victimizers underscores the importance of addressing underlying beliefs and attitudes in therapeutic settings. Interventions can focus on helping individuals reconcile their past experiences with their current behaviors in a healthy way, encouraging empathy and non-violent forms of conflict resolution.

Additionally, social policies that promote dialogue and understanding between conflicting groups can help reduce the likelihood of dissonant cognitions leading to aggressive or repressive behavior. By fostering environments where multiple perspectives are acknowledged and respected, societies can help prevent the cycle of victimization and reduce the rationalization of harm against others.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory thus not only helps explain certain aggressive behaviors but also guides the development of strategies to mitigate these behaviors in individuals and communities alike.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, we have explored several psychological and sociological theories that illuminate the complex transition from victims to victimizers. Each theory offers unique insights into how individuals and groups can adopt aggressive behaviors in response to their experiences of victimization.

1. **Cycle of Abuse:** This theory highlights how abusive behaviors can be perpetuated across generations or within relationships, often escalating over time unless the cycle is broken. It emphasizes the normalization of violence and the learned behaviors that can result from exposure to abuse.
2. **Victim to Victimizer Dynamics:** This dynamic explores the psychological shifts that occur when victims of oppression or abuse gain power. These shifts often involve a reassertion of control or an attempt to compensate for past injustices, which can manifest as aggressive behaviors toward others.
3. **Social Learning Theory:** According to this theory, behaviors are learned through observation and imitation of models within an individual's environment. It suggests that aggressive and abusive behaviors can be adopted if they are observed to be effective or rewarded.
4. **Identity Theory:** This sociological theory examines how oppressed groups can form identities around their victimization, which may lead to aggressive behaviors once these groups come into power. The theory discusses the role of group cohesion and the delineation between in-groups and out-groups in perpetuating conflict.

5. **Power Threat Hypothesis:** This hypothesis suggests that dominant groups may react aggressively when they perceive a threat to their power from emerging groups. It underscores the importance of understanding power dynamics in preventing the escalation of group conflicts.
6. **Cognitive Dissonance Theory:** This psychological theory explains how individuals resolve internal conflicts between their beliefs and behaviors. It demonstrates how victims might justify aggressive actions to align their behaviors with their self-concept or beliefs about justice and protection.

Implications for Preventing the Cycle of Victimization

Understanding these theories is crucial for developing interventions that can prevent the cycle of victimization and aggression. Effective prevention strategies might include:

- **Educational Programs:** Implementing programs that teach conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and non-violent communication from a young age.
- **Therapeutic Interventions:** Offering accessible mental health services that focus on trauma recovery and helping individuals understand and break cycles of abusive behavior.
- **Policy Initiatives:** Developing policies that address systemic inequalities and provide support for marginalized or oppressed communities to reduce the likelihood of these groups using aggression when they gain power.

Areas for Further Research and Interventions

Further research could explore the long-term effects of intervention programs that aim to alter observed behaviors in high-risk environments. Studies could also investigate the efficacy of community-based interventions that promote social cohesion and collective identities that transcend group divisions.

Additionally, interventions could focus on creating platforms for dialogue and reconciliation that involve both victims and perpetrators in post-conflict societies. These platforms could help address grievances, foster mutual understanding, and build sustainable peace.

In conclusion, while the transition from victims to victimizers is a deeply embedded and often cyclical process, the theories discussed provide valuable frameworks for understanding and addressing these patterns. By applying the insights from these theories, it is possible to develop more effective strategies for breaking the cycle of abuse and aggression, ultimately leading to healthier individuals and more harmonious societies.

