

## The Problematic Nature of the Victim Role

Wolf Wolfensberger

### Introduction

One of the milestones in the evolution of sociology as a social science was the work of Talcott Parsons (1951). One of the specifics of this work that many people remember or recognize—perhaps the only one—is Parson's delineation of the "sick role," one reason being that this delineation has been endlessly recited ever since, namely, that the sick role carries with it two privileges (i.e., not being blamed for the condition, and being exempt from normal duties and responsibilities), but also two obligations (i.e., desiring to get well, and making efforts to get appropriate treatment).

Many people ever since have delineated the nature of other distinct social roles. In the history of the principle of normalization (Wolfensberger, 1972) and Social Role Valorization (Wolfensberger, 1998), the delineation of a small number of historically recurring "deviancy roles" was particularly prominent and important: The roles of menace or object of dread, subhuman (animal, vegetable, or object), "the other," pity/charity, holy innocent, sick, dead or dying, child, etc. The two most extensive treatments of these roles are found in Wolfensberger (1969, reprinted in Wolfensberger, 1975), and Wolfensberger (1977), with some new deviancy roles described in Wolfensberger (1998). In 1994, Wolfensberger and Thomas (1994) also discussed in this journal the problematic "client role" that has been gaining such prominence in recent decades. In this article, I turn my attention to another problematic role that has assumed much prominence in recent decades, namely that of "victim."

### Analysis of the victim role

In the victim role, the party at issue (which could be a person or class) is seen as having been adversely acted upon by fate, nature, and/or other people, including social systems, with the emphasis often being on the latter. Thus, the party is interpreted as now suffering from some condition or situation which, in turn, is the harmful result of earlier action by outside forces. One of the privileges of this role, therefore, is that the party is not blamed for its condition, and is not seen as in any way responsible for it. The responsibilities or obligations that might go with this role are not as easy to identify, at least in part due to the recent tendency in Western societies to no longer view rights or privileges as carrying corresponding responsibilities or obligations. However, two responsibilities that many people would attach to the victim role are for its incumbent to try to overcome it or escape from it, and to resist any human party that is trying to perpetuate it.

In some instances these days, a form of victim role is even legislated, as by the designation—by law or court decree—of classes of alleged victims who, because of something that happened to them or to their ancestors, are given special legal privileges and protections that are not extended to either the majority, or to other classes, of citizens, not even ones that have also been victims. Ironically, such legally designated victim classes may even constitute a majority of society, rather than a minority. In the United States, females are currently one such designated majority class.

On the one hand, it is true that to all sorts of people, many bad things do happen that are either accidents of nature, or expressions of negative attitudes towards them by others, such as extensively described in our coverage of the common "wounds" of devalued people (e.g., Wolfensberger, 1998). Thus, it is certainly true that in many ways, all sorts of societally devalued people are "victims" in one way or another. On the other hand, there are all sorts of problems with the victim role as a role. These include the following.

- 1 The victim role in the contemporary societal context especially plays into a self-centeredness that is exalted by modernistic values. People tend to focus on themselves, their own welfare, their own concerns, their rights, etc., etc., and much less on the situation and concerns of others, even of others who may be in much worse straits than themselves. For instance, there has been a dramatic decline in membership and participation in social action groups that are outward-oriented toward concerns of non-members, but a dramatic increase in people's participation in so-called "self-help" groups (to be addressed in point 9). Rather than combating this development, as an adaptive social polity would require, a victim role mentality contributes to it. Consider how many people afflicted with various impairments advocate only for themselves and others with the same condition, rather than for things that would benefit entirely different parties, not to mention humanity in general. Several of the points that follow will bear out this first point.
- 2 Formerly, the notion of being a victim left open a rather large probability that one could be a victim of fate (such as storm victims, or victims of the plague) rather than of malefactors (of crime, of Nazism, etc.). However, in recent years, there has been an increasing refusal to accept that bad things can happen to one without some other human party being at fault. Thus, it is now commonly believed that some human party must be a

culpable malefactor who is responsible for one's plight.

- 3 Relatedly, the victimhood role these days often entails an entitlement mentality that insists that since some party must be at fault, that party needs to make up for it, usually by paying big damage awards. If the guilty party is unknown, such a one is nevertheless assumed to exist, and must be identified; and if it cannot be identified, the victim may lash out at whatever party has any connection to the events that led to one's alleged victimhood, and has assets that can be demanded in compensation. In other words, "someone will pay for this." Here are a few examples.

In 1988, terrorists blew up a jumbo jet over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing everyone aboard, including 35 Syracuse University students. To most people, this was a terrible tragedy, but to many parents of these students it was clearly more. They were largely privileged people, with few children, and many of them voiced things that strongly suggested that this was not only a great grief to them, but that they felt that their entitlements (e.g., to safe flights) had been violated.

In Texas, a woman got drunk to twice the legal driving limit, drove her car off a boat ramp, and drowned before being able to remove her seat belt, for which her estate won a \$65 million verdict against the car manufacturer (Chaven, 2000), which costs will eventually be passed on to the public.

Even if no particular party can be identified as responsible for one's troubles, people nonetheless have the idea that "somebody should pay" for their hardships and difficulties, and that this should be another party, not oneself. Even when a natural disaster strikes for which no one can be identified as responsible, people still demand that the government (which ultimately means the taxpayers) or some other party (such as an insurer) come up with money for the damages one has suffered. For example, a flu epidemic broke out in early 2000 in Britain, and people blamed the government, as if freedom from the flu were a government-guaranteeable entitlement.



Note that there is a very big difference between, on the one hand, people (and structures, such as government) voluntarily offering help, money, and other resources to people who truly have been the victims of some disaster, and on the other hand, the victims demanding such help and resources as their due.

One man who had much hard luck in life proclaimed that he intended "to sue the world" for all the injustices and wrongs that he felt had been done to him (personal communication to the author, 1995). In other words, the world owed him an absence of hard luck. Children who thought that life had dealt them a bad hand have even sued their parents for having given them life (e.g., *Boston Globe*, in *Indianapolis Star*, 1998, December 9).

Of course, once such a mentality takes hold, people whose bodies or minds have been damaged by acts of nature, or even by their own actions, begin to look on their bodily or mental afflictions no longer as misfortunes, but as injustices, setting in train a long line of derivative fallacious thinking.

- 4 An alleged victim party may refuse to accept responsibility for anything it may have done that may have resulted in, or contributed to, its alleged or real predicament. Thus, many people today act as if they are entitled to smoke or drink for a lifetime, fornicate unlimitedly with hundreds or even thousands of sex partners, ride a motorcycle or drive an automobile at high speeds without wearing safety devices—but that the public should then pay for their lung cancer bills, liver transplants and dialysis bills, sexually-transmitted disease bills, and life-long nursing home or rehabilitation bills. People who have smoked all their lives sue the tobacco firms for millions of dollars for selling tobacco to them. One family in which the husband and father got lung cancer from smoking for 40 years sued, and was awarded \$81 million (*Syracuse Herald-Journal*, 1999, April 7). Another man who started smoking after warning labels had been put on cigarettes was awarded \$20 million ("Jury Awards," 2000). A Florida

teenager who got seriously injured in a driving accident sued his city because the police "let him drive drunk" ("Teen Sues," 2000). A drunken bicyclist with a blood alcohol level of 0.13 ran a stop sign and pedalled right into the path of a police cruiser that had its lights flashing and siren blaring on its way to a domestic violence call. A court awarded the bicyclist \$95,000, responding to a lawyer's argument that the accident was at least in part the fault of the police officer because he was driving above the speed limit ("Rights of Drunks," 2000).

An American female soldier started gambling, lost \$28,000, and then started writing dozens of bad checks. The military was rather lenient with her and imposed a very mild sentence—but that was not good enough for her. She felt "let down" by the military, claiming it was eager to punish but slow to help people who become "addicted" ("Woman Blames," 2001).

In Syracuse, New York, a gang of 12 high school boys aged 16-18 talked a 14-year-old retarded girl from their school into going with them to the adjacent athletic grounds, where she voluntarily performed oral sex on seven of them. When the boys got caught, several of them said that they were the victims ("Take Sex Allegations Seriously," 2000).

In 2000, a prominent married pro football player faced sexual assault charges for engaging in a strip-drinking game with a minor. Although he was acquitted of the charges, he clearly was engaged in irresponsible and lewd behavior that was dangerous to the teenagers he was drinking with. Yet both he and his lawyer tried to interpret him as a victim, and he did not express remorse for his part in the behavior that led to the criminal charges (Whitlock, 2001).

- 5 Very much related to the entitlement mentality is that the victim role often feeds or encourages much unhealthy anger in the people who fill the role. They may be angry at what fate, or other parties, have done to them. They may be angry that it was they who had a particular kind of bad luck, rather than someone else. Granted, at least some anger may be perfectly

understandable, and on some occasions, even perfectly appropriate. For instance, if one became impaired because of some party's outright wrong-doing, one might very well be angry. But even justified anger can become maladaptive when it begins to consume one, when one becomes embittered, and when one becomes set on being unwilling to forgive. However, these days, one encounters many people who have suffered an impairment for which no one is culpable, or only they are, but who in either case are nevertheless very angry about their fate, and clearly feel victimized even if they would resent being interpreted that way by others.

- 6 Obviously, there are many benefits to be derived from a victim role, some of them apparent from the above.

In one instance, a man was mistakenly classified as mentally retarded as a child. Once he was an adult, and was retested and determined not to be mentally retarded (though he certainly had been wounded in other ways), he was no longer eligible for special services and funding through the state Department of Mental Retardation, upon which he sued to be given a diagnosis that would make him eligible for certain supports that he could not otherwise gain (*Syracuse Herald American*, 1999, January 10, p. D9).

In addition, a victim party may begin to revel in the so-called "secondary gains" of this role (extra attention, pity, etc.), and may therefore refrain from vigorous action to improve its lot. Particularly people who are deprived of affection and attention (perhaps due to their previous history of woundedness) may find such pity and attention rewarding, and may make no effort to escape the victim role because it would cost them these things that they enjoy. Such people can easily become "career victims," (i.e., people whose whole life is defined by the victim identity, and who perhaps endlessly rehash and retell the story of their victimage). In this respect, the victim role is also linked to the invalid role, in which a person is viewed as "sick" with a "disease" that is chronic and debilitating, which often confines a person to bed, which puts an end to virtually all other major roles

the person may have held, and which may continue for the remainder of the person's life—even a very long lifetime.

The benefits that can be derived from certain victim class memberships have become so substantial that some individuals who have not experienced victimship in their own lives nevertheless claim victim status by descent or inheritance. For example, even very privileged people have been clamoring for compensation for bad things done to their ancestors, sometimes even several generations ago. Similarly, various racial and ethnic groups, or their remote descendants, have been lobbying state legislatures to pass laws that would make it mandatory for the public schools to teach children about the stories of their ancestors' victimages. For instance, in New York State, there are now laws that mandate that schools teach about the Irish potato famine, slavery, the Underground Railroad, the Nazi Holocaust, etc. There are now also efforts to make it mandatory to teach the mistreatment of German-Americans, Italian-Americans, and Japanese-Americans in the US during the world wars. Formerly, truly victimized classes had no difficulty teaching their victim history to their children informally, even if their children were not even allowed to go to school, as in Ireland.

Some people even fake victimship in order to reap the benefits of the victim role. When a privileged-looking young woman had a car crash in a ghetto neighborhood, people ran into the intersection, threw themselves on the ground, and started moaning and crying in fake agony, pretending to have been hit and injured. A wise old bystander told the dumbfounded young woman: "You are like an angel dropped down from heaven for these people."

- 7 Even if other people do not pity the victim, the victim role may encourage self-pity in its incumbents. After all, if one views one's situation as a great injustice, or if one focuses obsessively on one's own suffering and hardships, and accepts no responsibility for any of these for which one was responsible, it is quite natural to begin to feel sorry for oneself. And, as is the case with anger, such self-pity can become virtually consuming,



especially in today's value context. However, self-pity is off-putting to others, who do not like to be around people who mope about their problems all the time. Thus, the self-pitying "victim" can become socially isolated, which is apt to feed yet further into their self-pity, or could engender anger, in a vicious cycle.

- 8 Unfortunately, having oneself been the victim—or at least the recipient—of many bad experiences in life is then sometimes used by such wounded parties as an excuse—or even an entitlement—for their doing bad things to others. It is an attitude that can be characterized as, "I've been badly hurt myself, so I can't be held responsible if I hurt others." In fact, when a person, or even an entire class, in the victim role does bad things to others, many victimophiles will tolerate no criticism of the "victim"-oppressor; such criticism may be interpreted by them as yet further victimization.
- 9 Several of the above points together have contributed to the fact that at least these days, people who see themselves as victims tend to draw together—e.g., in support groups—that endlessly rehash their hurts and grievances, rather than to get on with life. This tends to prevent healing, thus creating chronically wounded personalities, lending apparent validation to the service industry's efforts to make itself perceived as needed, as covered in the next point.
- 10 "Victimhood" tends to draw the human service industry on the victims. These days, this is apt to mean that things will be done by paid service workers that enlarge and/or perpetuate (e.g., by endless services and "therapies") a party's victim status and/or predicament, make it worse, or add new problems, in order to justify the work, training, and employment of all sorts of paid servers.

For example, when the federal building in Oklahoma City got blown up in April 1995, the Catholic churches in Syracuse, NY, took up a collection. To pay for funerals? To give orphans an

education? To subsidize families who had lost a breadwinner? No, it went largely to pay for what I call "shrinkery" for survivors.

During the US drought of 1988, many rural residents got their farms and livelihoods taken away. Human service agencies promptly set up hotlines and stress management programs for them, and booklets and similar resources started being produced on how farm families should cope with anxiety and stress, when what they needed was water and money.

In the 1990s, a storm severely battered Florida and destroyed much property, and the people there needed money and building materials to rebuild and repair—but instead, a veritable army of shrink types descended on them, some from more than 1,000 miles away.

When the Gulf War broke out, sex guru Ruth Westheimer rushed to Israel to lecture on "Sex Under Stress," and how to make love with your gas mask on (*US News & World Report*, 1991, February 18).

When people are poor and need money, they are apt to be offered . . . testing and counseling. Someone needs a job, and instead gets...assessment and counseling. After a few months or years of this, the family cracks up because of the stresses of unemployment—and what do they get? More shrinkery instead of money or a job.

One study (Liebow, 1993) found that when women in shelters for the homeless asked for a loan so that they could dress properly for a job interview, they were instead offered counseling, and how to write resumé's.

## Conclusion

While the victim has no doubt always existed, it appears to us to have increased dramatically in prevalence and prominence in recent years, with ever more people, and even entire classes, either being cast into it, or claiming it for themselves—and not only devalued classes. For instance, many people who are not members of a devalued class could suffer some catastrophe, such as an accident, or a natural disaster. Thus, many

individuals who enjoy valued status in society could also be put into, or could seize upon, the victim role.

We can see from the above that cultural values, economic motives, and motives of professional self-aggrandizement, have all been contributing to the prominence of the victim role in recent decades, and that no end of this trend is as yet visible. Even only the fact that contemporary human services are so dependent on so many people becoming and remaining their clients would inform us that the victim role will be adopted by, or imposed on, ever more individuals and groups, so as to sustain the post-primary production service economy.

One of the ways to combat the spread of maladaptive victim role incumbency is to enhance the competencies of people at risk. For instance, Nettlebeck, Wilson, Potter and Perry (2000) documented that retarded people who have a hostile outlook on life, and respond to people in a confrontative or abusive fashion, will be resented and victimized by others. This implies in turn that if retarded people were helped to develop greater interpersonal competency, they would be less likely to end up in a victim role, or at least in less of one. In fact, interpersonal competency seems to be one of the most important ones for many people who hold on to victim roles.

Playing the victim can be very easy, and rewarding to many people, whereas assuming personal responsibility, acquiring relevant competencies, and applying oneself in effort and work is much more demanding. This makes very relevant the analysis and advice to which I referred in my News and Review column in an earlier issue of this journal (Wolfensberger, 1999). There, I referred briefly to a book by McCullough (1995), *Nobody's Victim*, in which the author urges people to break out of the victim role, and out of the clutches of a "victim industry," and instead to "live free." In light of the above considerations, that seems to be the most adaptive mentality and strategy.

## References

- Chaven, M. (2000, April 7). More absurdities of the law. *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, p. A17.
- Jury awards dying ex-smoker \$20 million. (2000, March 28). *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, p. A4.
- Liebow, E. (1993). *Tell them who I am: The lives of homeless women*. New York: Penguin Books.
- McCullough, C. J. (1995). *Nobody's victim: Freedom from therapy and recovery*. New York: Clarkson Potter.
- Nettlebeck, T., Wilson, C., Potter, R., & Petty, C. (2000). The influence of interpersonal competence on personal vulnerability of persons with mental retardation. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 15(1), 46-62.
- Parsons, T. (1951). *The social system*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Rights of drunks. (2000, March). *Reader's Digest*, p. 114.
- Take sex allegations seriously. (2000, October 11). *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, p. A10.
- Teen sues Fla. city, police for letting him drive drunk. (2000, November 14). *Syracuse Post-Standard*, p. A4.
- Whitlock, J. (2001, February 7). Hypocrisy on display: Chmura seeks victim, hero status. *Syracuse Post-Standard*, p. B2.
- Wolfensberger, W. (1969). The origin and nature of our institutional models. In R. B. Kugel, & W. Wolfensberger (Eds.), *Changing patterns in residential services for the mentally retarded* (pp. 59-171). Washington, DC: President's Committee on Mental Retardation.
- Wolfensberger, W. (1972). *The principle of normalization in human services*. Toronto, ON: National Institute on Mental Retardation.
- Wolfensberger, W. (1975). *The origin and nature of our institutional models* (Rev. ed.). Syracuse, NY: Human Policy Press.

Wolfensberger, W. (1977). The normalization principle, and some major implications to architectural-environmental design. In M. J. Bednar (Ed.), *Barrier-free environments* (pp. 135-169). Stroudsburg, PA: Dowden, Hutchinson & Ross.

Wolfensberger, W. (1998). *A brief introduction to Social Role Valorization: A high-order concept for addressing the plight of societally devalued people, and for structuring human services* (3rd ed.). Syracuse, NY: Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership &, Change Agency (Syracuse University).

Wolfensberger, W. (1999). Social Role Valorization news and reviews. *SRV/VRS: The International Social Role Valorization Journal/La Revue Internationale de la Valorization des Rôles Sociaux*, 3(2), 44-55.

Wolfensberger, W., & Thomas, S. (1994). An analysis of the client role from a Social Role

Valorization perspective. *SRV/VRS: The International Social Role Valorization Journal/La Revue Internationale de la Valorisation des Rôles Sociaux*, 1(1), 3-8.

Woman blames U.S. military for her \$28,000 gambling losses. (2001, January 14). *Syracuse Herald American*, p. A16.

srv-vrs-srv-vrs-srv-vrs-srv-vrs-srv-vrs

Wolf Wolfensberger is the Director of the Syracuse University Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agency (TI), Syracuse NY, USA.