Comparative Study of Victim Mentality across Three Age-groups

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to study the trait of interpersonal victim-hood across three age-groups. Interpersonal victim-hood was measured using tendency for interpersonal victim-hood (TIV) scale. Kruskal-Wallis test indicated a significant difference across the three age-groups on TIV ($H = 18.1$, $p < 0.001$). Pair-wise comparisons indicated that middle aged- adults differed significantly from both adolescents and young adults. The difference between young adults and adolescents however was found to be non-significant. The study highlights the implications of the increase in the levels of this trait.

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1. Introduction

People who believe that they have no authority over the occurrences in their life and are always at the receiving end can be termed as having victim mentality (Wolfensberger, 2001). A recent study establishes that the feeling of victimization in social interactions and attachments is a relatively permanent trait (Gabay et al., 2020). This inclination has been increased by west's new practices of not holding the previously disadvantaged groups of society accountable and bound for what they do (Wolfensberger). Earlier, being a victim and less privileged was looked down upon (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009) but unlike before, now people want to be considered victim more often as it has certain advantages and can yield respect by placing such people on ethically high grounds (Strassel, 2001). Due to the such internal and external potential perks, people strive for the role of the ill-fated and the disadvantaged in the society (Sullivan et al., 2012). A person or a whole class can fall prey to the thinking that they are the victim of circumstances beyond personal control. Factors perceived as responsible for the misfortunes in such people's lives can range from other people and situations to abstract forces such as luck (Wolfensberger). The tendency for interpersonal victimhood can be described as a persistent belief that people have of being wronged and it eventually it becomes the defining feature of their personality and identity (Kaufman, 2020a). People may have such a belief while not having experienced any victimization in reality (Klar, Schori-Eyal, & Klar, 2013; Urlic, Berger, & Berman, 2010). Wolfensberger says that the plus point this mentality carries is that one does not consider oneself to be responsible for the misery one goes through in life and rather all blame is put on others. He further says that the western culture has aided in this mentality by giving no responsibilities and obligation to formerly less privileged parts of the society like females in the US. Few authors have debated that the USA has become a land of sufferers and all groups are competing with each other to be recognized as marginalized (Cole, 2006).

One study established that helping men remember their privileges they have in comparison to women lessened their within group welfare as compared to the condition when they were made to remember their victimization (Branscombe, 1998). This can result in different marginalized parts of society engaging in competitive victim-hood (Todorov & Todorov, 2016). Catholics and Protestants through different art forms and representative styles engage with each other to present themselves as the victimized and the group on losing side in history (Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008). Likewise, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict always narrows down to which side is more marginalized and victimized (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008). Nietzsche (1989) as well has shed light on the occurrence of giving greater ethical standing to the marginalized group. According to him, the virtues that were considered superior and exemplary in the past were tied to strength and capability, and now superiority is associated more with modesty, agony, sacrifice and suffering. The upheaval of modern liberalism and acknowledgement of discrepancies in the past have created a reversal in last 300 years (Butera & Levine, 2009). The groups which were labeled inferior and sidelined now embrace their group identity and on the basis of that hold higher moral grounds for being victimized (e.g., African Americans, Hindu Dalits) (Mahalingam, 2007). Similarly, the group that once enjoyed privileges and power over others are now ashamed of it even many generations down and are penalised for the actions of their ancestors. (Butera & Levine, 2009). The reshaping of the idea of group morality such that the successors of previously disadvantaged groups get higher moral standings and descendants of previous victimizers bear the guilt of atrocities committed by their forefathers, can result in stigma reversal (Killian, 1985).

Victim mentality can be so intense that there have been examples of people who believed that life was unjust to them and therefore they went ahead to such an extent that they took legal actions against their parents for bringing them into this world (Wolfensberger). Cognitive researches say that people with victim mentality feel that everything is beyond their control and they have nothing to do with the actual factors that resulted in them being ill-treated (Bar-Tal et al., 2009). In other words, it can be said that instead of being realistic, people generally consider themselves to be mostly good less susceptible to making any mistakes. The studies also suggest that people with victim mentality rarely hold themselves accountable; have a poor sense of responsibility and are ill mannered and ill-tempered with others (Kets De Vries, 2014). Kets De Vries (2014) further adds that the locus of control is always external for these people, for example they would frequently justify their faults and failures by referring to dominating people around them and to luck or destiny. Moreover, not only that they want to be known as victims but they also reject efforts of help from others, thereby profiting by playing the role of the powerless. Being paid attention to, corroborated and having a shoulder to cry on makes such people feel good since the victim role frees such people from any responsibility and accountability. They put their burden on others and get a sense of moral superiority and relief; it also reduces the chances of doing good because one feels that they are already better and superior to others (Zitek et al., 2010). There has been a great shift in the western world about the narrative of victim-hood and how it is presented to the public with greater emphasis and empathy for the victimized even to the point of fabrication (Greer, 2012 as cited in (Lewis, 2017)). It is reported that even in cases of small offenses claiming the victim status can get people favors and make offenders pay hefty compensations, more so today as compared to the past (Campbell & Manning, 2014). Analysis of different aspects of victim mentality have led researchers to stress that the victims can often knowingly and unknowingly create unlawful situations with an unconscious motive of having people on their side and making them feel bad for them. Meanwhile the victim portrayal has been conceptualized as an amalgamation of characteristics such as helplessness, need for support, vulnerability and lack of confidence, which are learned through observation; via media or personal experience (Klachkova, 2007, as cited in (Kostyunina et al., 2019)).

Victimhood is also related to feeling of disparity and considering oneself as ethically higher than others (Leahy, 2012). On a personal basis, moral elitism gives people the window to accuse others of wrong doing while perceiving themselves as the righteous ones. Probably victim mentality makes people so much indulged with their own problems that clinical psychologists also believe that such people are unable to support or acknowledge other's sufferings (Urlic, Berger, & Berman, 2010). Five studies working on four different inter-group contexts revealed that people compete for the role of victim or the less privileged within a group as it reduces the intensity of allegation and reaction by others (Sullivan et al., 2012). Being from a formerly victimized group can permit people to engage in activities that would be deemed unacceptable if done by a previously non-victimized group (Branscombe, 1998). Tendency for interpersonal victim-hood (TIV) and narcissism i.e. the feature of one's character where there's high regard

for one's self, a sense of superiority and a need for constant recognition (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), are also said to share common aspects like unstable self-image and vulnerability to threat to self (Gabay et al., 2020). Over the years, researches have observed an increase in narcissistic tendencies among people (Twenge et al., 2008) and some researchers propose usage of social media as the reason behind it (Brydon, 2010). Studies claim that narcissism aids in too much social media engagement and an inclination to be liked and admired on the web and is true for both types of narcissism (grandiose and vulnerable) (Brailovskaia et al., 2020). People engage on social media to have a sense of belongingness, to enjoy and to complain about things in life that they do not like (Leung, 2013). Need for recognition in the context of interpersonal victim-hood also refers to the desire of being known as victimized by all and thus getting attention and sympathy from others (Twali et al., 2020), which is similar to the reasons why narcissists engage on social media.

One very important consequence of victim-hood is helplessness that refers to learning either through direct exposure or through observation, a mentality that nothing can be done to change the undesirable circumstances (Ackerman, 2018). Although undesirable circumstances may or may not be a result of our own actions, however according to cognitive researches people with victim mentality firmly believe that they have no power and authority over the events in their lives and hence have no role in causing their adversity (Bar-Tal et al., 2009). A research conducted in Russia has established that people with high levels of victimhood rely on irrational beliefs and see every situation from a biased lens of firm confidence in one's own innocence and negative perception of every other person and situation. Andronnikova and Kudinov (2021) Another study by Ok et al. (2021) investigating the negative characteristics associated with victim-hood highlighted how victim-hood can indicate the presence of the dark triad personalities (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, Psychopathy). Early adulthood is a period of transition in a person's life when people are tackling with stressful issues regarding education, career and relationships at the same time. A recent study has found a moderately positive correlation between interpersonal victimhood and perceived stress among young adults (Prathipaasri, 2023). Therefore, it can be speculated that stressors of early adulthood make people assume the role of victim as a coping mechanism. Soave (2020) also highlight that at university levels, due to this mentality, people now demand investigations of even minute and unimportant issues. Turanovic (2015) as well reports that victim mentality is most intense in adolescence but the intensity decreases as a person ages. In light of existing research literature, it can be hypothesized that young adults, adults and middle-aged adults may differ in terms of interpersonal victim-hood. The findings would help us identify and compare the tendency of victim mentality across different age-groups. Moreover, this study may also help shed light on the changes in moral and ethical standards that evolve with age. The study of victimhood is relevant in the context of Quetta as the citizens of this region have undergone a lot more political and economic challenges than the rest of the country. Terrorist attacks, target killings, political unrest as well as lack of opportunities for personal and professional growth have probably inculcated a sense of deprivation in the people of this city already. In such circumstances, perceived interpersonal victimhood can be one of the various factors that shape people's attitude towards their personal and professional lives. The study may help identify such attitudes and inspire in depth exploration of the causes and consequences of such behaviors.

2. Method
2.1. Sample
A convenience sample of 484 men and women from Quetta city in the three age groups, adolescence (13 to 18 years), young adulthood (19 to 40 years) and middle adulthood (41 to 60 years) was recruited for the study (see Table 1). The age groups were based on categorization by Santrock (2013). Only the participants who were familiar with English language were selected for the study as the questionnaire administered was in English language. The data was collected in person, on hard copies of questionnaires along with signed informed consent.

2.2. Measures
The Tendency for Interpersonal Victim-hood Scale (TIV) was used to measure victim-hood, developed by Gabay et al. (2020). The scale consists of 22 items which are assessed on a 7 point Likert scale. The scale has a Cronbach alpha of .92 and test-retest reliability of .77 (Gabay et al., 2020).

3.   Results

Statistical analysis showed the data to be falling in acceptable ranges in terms of normality and internal consistency for TIV (see Table 2). Levene's test however turned out to be significant that indicated that variances across the three age groups were not homogeneous. Therefore, Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted which showed a significant difference across the three age groups on TIV (H = 18.1, p <0.001) (see Table 3). Pairwise comparisons indicated that middle aged adults were significantly different from young adults (p = .041) as well as from adolescents (p = .000). The difference between young adults and adolescents was not significant (see Table 4). The test statistics for pairwise comparisons also show that middle aged adults scored lower than both young adults and adolescents.

4.   Discussion

The present study was conducted to examine the characteristic of perceived interpersonal victimhood (TIV) across three age-groups. The results showed that there is significant a difference across the three groups on TIV, with middle-aged adults showing significantly lower levels of tendency for interpersonal victim-hood in comparison with both young adults and adolescents. There can be various possible explanations for such findings. One possible explanation can be given in terms of differences in wisdom, which is a trait that involves self awareness and self control. Although the relationship between age and wisdom is complex but generally wisdom is considered to develop with age (Ardelt, Pridgen, & Nutter-Pridgen, 2018; Webster, Westerhof, & Bohlmeijer, 2014) (Glück, 2023;. Chouliaraki (2021) discusses how the culture of vulnerability and presenting oneself as victimized has developed over the years as a means to gain power and recognition with this trend getting even more established with the increasing availability of online platforms to express oneself. Therefore, the excessive usage of social media among adolescents and young adults can be proposed as another plausible explanation for relatively higher levels of interpersonal victimhood found among adolescents and young adults as studies suggest higher levels of social media usage among younger adults as compared with older adults (Albashrawi et al., 2022; Mazzoni & Iannone, 2014). If the content shared on social media is analyzed, it is common to observe that people usually put statuses and stories in various forms on social media apps to tell how they have been wronged in life. Kaufman (2020b) highlights that victim mentality gets perceived on social media in a positive light and thus it makes one win advantages and leverages through appearing victimized. Since it has become a norm these days to show sympathy on social media platforms for any kind of victims, this is not surprising that such people presenting themselves as victims happen to find support and sympathy more often (Brown, 2017; Clark, 2016). Therefore this can be speculated that higher levels of social media engagement among people in adolescence and young adulthood may be one of the factors causing higher levels of victimhood among these age groups.

High levels of interpersonal victimhood in adolescents and young adults can probably have alarming implications, as they are the at the most active and energetic stages of life. For example, arising from the lack of perceived accountability that victim mentality may result in, one of the undesirable outcomes can be a possible increase in aggressive attitudes. Chetty and Alathur (2018) highlight how hate speech has increased as a result of extensive usage of social media apps. On national or international level such attitudes can take the form of siege mentality that can result in severe cases of self-protective aggression towards 'others' (Szabó, 2020). Other studies as well suggest that perceived victim-hood can result in political violence (Chen, Ok, & Aquino, 2022; Hameiri et al., 2024). As discussed earlier, the findings that suggest relatively higher levels of TIV among adolescents and young adults in the context of Quetta need special attention as people in this city have remained underprivileged for many decades. Such deprivation in terms of opportunities, resources and political stability seem to have already set the ground for people here to feel victimized and traumatized. Adolescents and young adults probably are currently not only struggling with this deprivation, but also have the support from various kinds of media in highlighting and reinforcing their victim status. This could have been one of the factors causing relatively higher levels of victimhood among these two age groups.

4.1.   Implications

The findings of the present study highlight the need to explore the underlying causes for high levels of interpersonal victimhood in adolescence and young adulthood. The developmental changes that adolescents and young adults experience, need to be investigated for their moral and ethical consequences. The study presents excessive usage of social media as one of the reasons for increased attention seeking attitudes, resulting in interpersonal victim-hood, as this

is probably the most salient characteristic of the modern world that adolescents and young adults are exclusively exposed to. However, there may also be some socio-emotional factors at work too as technological advancement alone cannot give rise to the trait of interpersonal victimhood, such factors need to be explored as well. Another dimension in exploring developmental patterns in interpersonal victimhood is the cognitive and emotional change that accompanies middle age. Cognitive and emotional changes that come with aging probably can be among the factors causing low levels of interpersonal victimhood. In order to deal with increase in victimhood , certain measures need to be taken, so that the possible consequences of increase in the incidence of this trait could be avoided. Probably the sense of accountability, responsibility and conscientiousness needs to be reinstated among adolescents and young adults. This change can take place much more effectively if rules and principals in professional and educational settings are implemented on a regular basis and people are educated about when they deserve to complain and when they need to take responsibility for whatever has happened to them. Moreover, media can play a very important role by decreasing the practice of sensationalizing almost every event of victimization. The sensational nature of news and events involving some group's or some person's victimization probably decreases the tendency of logical analysis and therefore people begin to make biased judgments based solely on appeal to emotions.

4.2. Limitations

The study was carried out primarily with educated people who could read and write in English language. The segments of the population who are less educated could not be included in the sample which restricts the generalizability of the findings to the educated class of society. Since, the social composition of Quetta city includes a large percentage of people who cannot read and understand English but are active citizens as businessmen, home makers and students, future studies should investigate interpersonal victimhood in these segments of society as well.

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Appendix
Table 1: Descriptive of the Sample

	Frequency	Percent
40 - 60 years	142	29.3
19 - 40 years	170	35.1
13 - 18 years	172	35.5
Total	484	100.0

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for TIV Scores

N	484
Mean	4.8
Median	4.9
Skewness	-.48
Kurtosis	.34
Maximum	7
Minimum	1.4
Cronbach's Alpha	.90

Table 3: Kruskal-Wallis Test Summary

N	484
Test statistic (adjusted for ties)	18.1
Degree of freedom	2
p–asymptotic significance (2-sided test)	.000

Table 4: Pairwise Comparisons of Three Age Groups on TIV

	Test-Statistics	Standard Error	Std. Statistic	Test	*p*	Adj. *p*
Adolescents-Young Adults - Adolescents	-28.3	15.12	-1.87		.06	.183
Middle-Aged Adults - Adolescents	-67.4	15.85	-4.25		.000	.000
Middle Aged Adults - Young Adults	-39.06	15.89	-2.45		.01	.04