

*From Victim Precipitation to Perpetrator Predation:
Towards a New Paradigm for Understanding Workplace Aggression*

Lilia M. Cortina

University of Michigan

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Models of workplace aggression inform research, policy, and practice. One such framework emphasizes the victim's role in provoking mistreatment: *victim precipitation*.

According to this hypothesis, some victims (whether they realize it or not) invite abuse through their personalities, attitudes, or actions. In short, characteristics or conduct of the victim make her/him to a certain degree culpable for the misdeeds of others. This account of aggression is becoming increasingly popular in organizational science. But should it?

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview, critique, and alternative to the victim precipitation hypothesis. I begin by charting the history of this model, from research on homicide to rape to abusive supervision on the job. In chronicling that history, I review the flaws of victim precipitation scholarship as described by sociologists, psychologists, and other social scientists over several decades. I then propose an alternative paradigm for understanding workplace aggression: *perpetrator predation*. Rather than a substantive "model" per se, drawing attention to a specific set of variables, perpetrator predation is a broad analytic lens through which many variables can be understood. I conclude by illustrating the utility of this paradigm in research on the dynamics of abuse in work organizations.

The Victim Precipitation Model over Time

Rise of a model. The victim precipitation model originated 75 years ago, in the work of German criminologist Hans von Hentig and Romanian defense attorney Benjamin Mendelsohn. The key argument was that some crime victims invite their own victimization, often unconsciously. As von Hentig (1940, p. 303) wrote,

...the human victim in many instances seems to lead the evil-doer actively into temptation. The predator is—by varying means—prevailed upon to advance against the prey. If there are born criminals, it is evident that there are born victims, self-harming and self-destroying through the medium of a pliable outsider.

Von Hentig went on to argue that, in these cases, the victim “shapes and molds the criminal” (1948, p. 384). Such victims, in other words, bear some proportion of blame for the crimes that follow.

The victim precipitation hypothesis became popular among some criminologists and criminal defense attorneys in the 1950s and 60s. They often invoked it when trying to explain violent crime, such as armed robbery, sexual assault, and homicide. For instance, Marvin Wolfgang (1957) studied “victim precipitated criminal homicide,” referring to crimes in which victims had initiated physical attack prior to being murdered. The following decade, Menachem Amir wrote about “victim precipitated forcible rape” (1967), meaning:

...those rape situations in which the victim actually, or so it was deemed, agreed to sexual relations but retracted before the actual act or did not react strongly enough when the suggestion was made by the offender(s). The term applies also to cases in risky or vulnerable situations, marred with sexuality, especially when the victim uses what could be interpreted as indecency in language and gestures... (p. 495)

Looking for cases matching this definition in Philadelphia Police Department files, Amir concluded that 19% of rape victims during a one-year period had been “precipitators” of their own assaults; some of their assailants, he reasoned, were therefore “less guilty” (p. 502).

The ideology of victim precipitation also gained acceptance in the psychoanalytic community. One of Mendelsohn’s key articles, for example, appeared in the *Revue Française de*

Psychanalyse (French Review of Psychoanalysis; 1958). Psychoanalysts later developed therapeutic techniques aimed at “remotivating” victims to stop provoking abuse. As analyst Irwin Kutash explained, “victims sometimes promote their attack...The goals of this treatment are to prevent the repetition of the invitation to be aggressed against and to help remotivate the victiming individual” (Kutash, 1984, p. 47; see also Kutash, 1978)

Fall of a model. In subsequent decades, the victim precipitation model fell out of favor in multiple circles. Criminologists criticized research on victim precipitation for unfounded assumptions, untestable hypotheses, tautological reasoning, flawed analyses, flimsy evidence, overly broad generalizations, and inattention to the structure of society as a source of crime (e.g., Eigenberg & Garland, 2003; Franklin & Frankin, 1976; Meloy & Miller, 2011; Timmer & Norman, 1984; Weis & Borges, 1973). For instance, Clyde and Alice Franklin demonstrated how “the lack of independence between the presumed causative factor (victim-precipitative behavior) and the resultant condition (victimization)” yields circular reasoning (Franklin & Franklin, 1976 p. 126). Researchers also noted problems in the empirical record supporting the victim precipitation model. As an example, one piece of evidence that Amir (1967) cited for the concept of victim-precipitated rape was victims having “bad reputations” in their communities prior to their assaults (according to police). In addition, sociologists noted that,

The ‘ideology of victim precipitation’ – by blaming the individual crime victim – only serves to divert attention and resources away from the structural causes of crime and the structural changes required by a less criminogenic society, and renders the existing social, political and economic orders more legitimate (Timmer & Norman, 1984, p. 63).

After seeing this model give rise to regressive victim-blaming attitudes and ineffective crime prevention programs, many criminologists discarded the notion of victim precipitation.

On another front, the 1960s and 70s brought the second wave of the women's movement and, along with it, an explosion of feminist social science. Feminists directed new attention to the issue of rape/sexual assault, demanding that it not be ignored, trivialized, or framed as justified. The research that followed unpacked the problems of the victim precipitation hypothesis. As Ronald Berger and Patricia Searles (1985) explained,

The entire concept of victim-precipitated rape should be abandoned. The concept merely converts sexist rationalizations into a causal explanation... The concept also assumes that the offender rests in a passive state and is set into motion primarily by the victim's behavior, that the victim's behavior is a necessary and sufficient condition for the offense, and that the intent of the victim can be inferred from his or her resultant victimization (p. 9)

Feminists documented the practical repercussions of viewing rape through a victim precipitation lens. If a woman has participated in the events "causing" her to be sexually assaulted (as per victim precipitation logic), then she is partly at fault for that crime. This line of thinking can raise questions about her rapist's guilt, sometimes to the point of exoneration: "the victim's behavior becomes grounds for granting a 'reasonable doubt' to the offender's criminal intent in a court of law" (Berger & Searles, 1985, p. 9; see also LeGrand, 1973). This reduction in assailant culpability is part and parcel of the victim precipitation hypothesis: Amir (1967) stated that this model, as applied to sexual assault, "does not make any offender innocent but allows us to consider some of these men, at least, less guilty and leads us to consider that the victim is perhaps also responsible for what happened to her." In other words, the victim precipitation argument helps some rapists escape penalty for their crimes.

Victim precipitation tends to turn up as an explanation for crimes such as sexual assault and intimate partner violence – that is, “crimes of personal violence committed by (mostly) men against (mostly) women” (Meloy & Miller, 2011, p. 11). We do not see this hypothesis applied as frequently to other offenses. For example, if a family’s home is burgled, they are typically not accused of inviting the burglary by having nice things. As sociologists Michelle Meloy and Susan Miller ask, “why is it that we tend to sympathize with someone who is mugged, burglarized, or injured by a drunk driver, yet victims of male-on-female violence often experience victim blaming and self-blame?” (2011, p. 7). One answer to this question lies in cultural ideologies surrounding violence against women.

Both sociologists and psychologists have demonstrated that victim precipitation ideas are central to the ideology of *rape myths* (e.g., Burt, 1980; Cowan, 2000; Koss, 1985; Timmer & Norman, 1984; Wisan, 1979). This refers to what Martha Burt defined as “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists” (1980, p. 217). These widespread misconceptions function to deny and justify rape, one result being that the US has the highest rate of sexual violence in the industrialized world (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999). A core rape myth is that women incite men to sexually assault them – through their attire, demeanor, behavior, or even *lack* of behavior (e.g., failure to physically fight off an assailant). Because they “ask for it,” rape victims deserve the violence that ensues.

Belief in rape myths is not without consequence: compared to other men, those who endorse this ideology are more supportive of sexual aggression, more aroused by depictions of sexual assault, and more likely to actually commit sexual assault (e.g., Brown & Messman-Moore, 2010; Bohner, Siebler, & Schmelcher, 2006; Fischer, 1996; Koss & Dinero, 1989; Loh,

Gidycz, Lobo, & Luthra, 2005; Malamuth, 1981; Scully & Marolla, 1984; Thompson et al., 2011; Tyler et al., 1998; Vogel, 2000). Rape myths also loom large in the criminal justice process, factoring into police, prosecutor, and jury behavior (e.g., Coates & Wade, 2004; Brekke & Borgida, 1988; Spears & Spohn, 1997; Tetreault, 1989). For example, these fallacies played a role in law enforcement decisions *not* to submit thousands of rape kits to forensic laboratories for analysis. Instead of being tested, this biological evidence sat for decades in police storage sites across the country (e.g., Campbell et al., 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2010; The Weiner Report, 2002).

A parallel mythology pertains to sexual harassment in organizations. For example, some individuals believe that harassed women “ask for it” by wearing revealing clothing or using crude language on the job (Lonsway, Cortina & Magley, 2008). The more people buy into these fictions about workplace aggression, the more they endorse rape myths as well as hostile attitudes toward women (correlations ranging from .57 to .64; Lonsway et al., 2008). This research on cultural ideologies surrounding rape and harassment, accumulated over forty years, lays bare the harms inherent in the victim precipitation argument.

In summary, across multiple social science communities the victim precipitation model has been closely analyzed, criticized, and rejected as spurious and dangerous. Today, this framework does not hold sway within the discipline where it was originally born – criminology. The last decade has seen the model gain traction, however, in the field of organizational behavior. I turn to this development next.

Victim Precipitation of Workplace Aggression?

Renaissance of a model. Applied to organizations, the victim precipitation model contends that many workplace abuse victims bring about their own victimization, whether they

realize it or not. According to this argument, certain workers (e.g., those who are anxious, insecure, disagreeable, etc.) “consciously or unconsciously participate in the sequence of events that leads to their becoming targets” (Aquino & Byron, 2002, p. 72). Such nods to psychodynamic notions of the unconscious are rare in organizational science. Nevertheless, this account for workplace aggression is rising in popularity: A Google Scholar search of the terms “workplace,” “aggression,” and “victim precipitation” returned 46 works published from the years 2000 through 2004. This number jumped to 72 between 2005 through 2009, and it soared to 256 in the years 2010 through 2014.

The victim precipitation model is cropping up across the organizational literature, especially in Karl Aquino’s research on workplace victimization (e.g., Aquino, 2000; Aquino & Bradfield, 2000; Aquino & Byron, 2002; Aquino & Lamertz, 2004; Aquino & Thau, 2009). The concept of victim precipitation has also factored into scholarship on abusive supervision (Chan & McAllister, 2014; Tepper et al., 2006, 2011), workplace bullying (Samnani, 2013; Samnani & Singh 2015), workplace exclusion (Scott, Restubog, & Zagencyk, 2013), and workplace incivility (Milam, Spitzmueller & Penney, 2009). Many of these articles appeared in the top journals of our field, including *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Management*, and *Organization Science*.

Dangers of a model. Organizational scientists are flocking to the victim precipitation model, a trend that is troubling. The concept of victim precipitation still suffers from the many flaws catalogued by criminologists, psychologists, sociologists, and feminist social scientists. This hypothesis still blames one person for another’s misconduct. Even if scholars do not aim to blame victims of violence for their fate, they effectively do so when invoking this model. That is, “wherever victim precipitation is offered as an explanation, it serves to place responsibility on

the victim: you cause, or help to cause, your own victimization” (Timmer & Norman, 1984, p. 65).

In fact, the victim precipitation model leads researchers (as well as police and prosecutors) to *scrutinize* victims, asking questions about their agreeable or disagreeable dispositions, submissive or provocative behaviors, low or high performance, and so on. When the aggression takes sexual forms, the (typically female) victim’s manner of speech and dress also become objects of analysis, framed as potential causal factors in the abuse that followed. While victims are closely studied in this work, offenders are often all but ignored. In the worst cases, their abusive conduct begins to seem justified, because “the concept of victim precipitation provides a cultural framework which offenders can use to rationalize their behavior” (Eigenberg & Garland, 2003, p. 32). Again, this happens whether researchers intend it or not.

We can see the dangers of an asymmetric, victim-scrutinizing perspective in contemporary programming to prevent sexual violence in the military work environment. For example, at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, a Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program poster contained the headline, “Avoid Becoming a Victim.” The poster included advice such as “Try to avoid areas that are secluded” and “Socialize with people who share your values” (Wiederspahn, 2013). These recommendations imply that personnel can control whether or not others assault them; it then follows that, if an assault takes place, we can fault the victim (not the assailant) for failing to prevent it. Posters such as this could instead hold people responsible for their own (mis)conduct. Under the headline “Avoid becoming a perpetrator,” messages could include “Treat others with respect,” “Put an end to put-downs,” and “Don’t interpret silence as consent.”

Perpetrator Predation

Organizational science can do better than victim precipitation. It might well be that features of employees increase the risk that a hostile or rude colleague selects them for abuse. For instance, some harassers prey on victims who threaten their social identity or status, with the harassment serving as an attempt to neutralize that threat (e.g., Berdahl, 2007; Dall'Ara & Maass, 1999; Maass et al., 2003). Many abusers target people perceived as weak in some way – e.g., small in stature, meek in personality, or undocumented in immigration status (e.g., Cortina & Berdahl, 2008; *Escamilla v. SMS Holdings Corp.*, 2011; *Oncala v. Sundowner Offshore Services*, 1998). These victims often lack social, psychological, or physical power to fend off attack or report wrongdoing. Rather than criticize them for these “weaknesses” (as implied by victim precipitation research), we can investigate what drives coworkers to exploit them. Responsibility for the aggressive act would then rest where it should: with the perpetrator.

A paradigm shift. Above, I use the expression “prey on” quite deliberately. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a “predator” is a person who “lives by predation,” or “looks for other people in order to use, control, or harm them in some way.” Instead of endorsing the flawed ideology of *victim precipitation*, I suggest *perpetrator predation* as a better analytic frame for this line of inquiry. It retains the idea that some individuals might be more likely to “fall prey” than others (due to low status, anxious personality, or other characteristics that make them socially or psychologically vulnerable); it focuses, however, on the person who targets those characteristics. It also calls attention to power, because there is often a power disparity between predator and prey. As Tepper, Moss, and Duffy (2011, p. 283) write, “potential aggressors choose targets strategically, focusing their hostility on people who seem difficult to like and/or those who appear to be vulnerable and unable to defend themselves.” Ben Tepper and

his colleagues offered this argument to illustrate victim precipitation, but really this reasoning is more aptly described as perpetrator predation.

A perpetrator predation lens imparts agency unambiguously on the aggressor. Again looking to Merriam-Webster, an “agent” is “a person or thing that causes something to happen” and “one that acts or exerts power.” As the agent, the aggressor is responsible for the events that transpire. In most workplace abuse situations, the perpetrator is an adult who should understand right from wrong and be awake, alert, and sober while on the job. In addition, that person sometimes holds a position of power (e.g., in cases of abusive supervision). No amount of neuroticism, provocation, or underperformance on the part of victims should lessen the perpetrator’s responsibility for his or her conduct. If at all, the opposite holds true: those in power should be held *more* accountable for abusing the vulnerable. Victim characteristics might help us understand why the actor selected that particular colleague for abuse. But it is important to emphasize that it was the actor, not the victim, who did the selecting and abusing. The perpetrator predation framework keeps this reality front and center.

Note that, in using verbs such as “target,” “choose,” and “prey on,” I do not mean to imply that these perpetrators are always aware of the selective or abusive nature of their actions. We know from extensive research in social psychology that contemporary bias often shapes behavior without actors (or targets) even realizing it. Stereotypes, for example, can be *implicit*, operating with no intention, effort, awareness, or control on the part of the actor (e.g., Devine & Monteith, 1999; Jones, 2002). So an individual may implicitly harbor hostilities against certain groups (e.g., immigrants, feminists), which can lead him or her to mistreat members of those groups; that instigator may have no insight into the discriminatory nature of his/her misconduct. Alternatively, a perpetrator may endorse explicit biases and strategically abuse certain colleagues

with full awareness, understanding, and intent. Both cases could be examples of perpetrator predation.

Perpetrator predation is not a “model” in the sense of specifying a particular set of variables as cause, consequence, or boundary condition for aggression. It is more of a paradigm – that is, a broad framework or analytic lens. One might also think of it as a *sensitizing concept*. According to sociologist Kathy Charmaz (2003, p. 259), “sensitizing concepts offer ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience; they are embedded in our disciplinary emphases and perspectival proclivities” (see also Blumer, 1954). In other words, perpetrator predation provides a guiding frame through which empirical observations can be viewed and interpreted. It can be applied to the understanding of many different variables, situations, traits, policies, and behaviors implicated in workplace abuse. This lens can guide each stage of the research process, from the generation of empirical questions to the design of research protocols to the analysis and interpretation of data. New theory can emerge.

In addition to facilitating research, a perpetrator predation framework can direct practical efforts to interrupt, investigate, and remediate aggression in organizations. This approach would be consistent with current best practices used by police to intervene in cases of aggression and violence. Again turning to the example of sexual assault, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP, the preeminent organization for law enforcement leadership) rejects the notion of victim precipitation, adding that police should “reassure victims that, regardless of their behavior, no one has the right to sexually assault them” (IACP, 2005, p. 4). The IACP directs sexual assault investigators to focus principally on the alleged perpetrator:

While investigative emphasis has historically focused on the victim’s behavior, the reality of these crimes is that the suspect is often known to the victim and thus can be identified

easily. An effective investigation will concentrate on gathering as much evidence as possible on the suspect...not on the victim's character, behavior, or credibility" (IACP, 2005, p. 6).

Applications of a perpetrator predation lens to workplace aggression interventions would parallel these best practices in contemporary law enforcement.

Illustrating the utility of a perpetrator predation lens. Through the framework of perpetrator predation, researchers can investigate substantive models of workplace aggression. Indeed, many such models already exist, accounting for abuse in a manner consistent with perpetrator predation. For instance, my own model of *selective incivility* describes how employees can single out women and personnel of color for mistreatment, even without realizing it, due to implicit biases in cognition and emotion (Cortina, 2008; Cortina et al., 2013). A second example is Peggy Stockdale's (2005) *approach-rejection theory of same-sex harassment*; she explains how some men selectively victimize other men (especially those who are effeminate, gay, or in other ways insufficiently masculine) as punishment for flouting heterosexual gender norms. What unifies these two theoretical models is attention to factors within perpetrators that motivate them to prey on particular colleagues. Some of these factors involve the targets, but the focus is still on perpetrators (e.g., men feeling a sense of threat or hostility toward women professionals, whom the men stereotype as competent but cold). Recommendations for reform, therefore, also center on perpetrators (e.g., teaching employees how to self-monitor and interrupt stereotype application) or their social context (e.g., modifying the organizational environment to inhibit stereotype activation; Cortina, 2008; see also Kabat-Farr & Cortina, 2012). These recommendations do *not* place the onus of change on the victim; for example, there is no

suggestion that women professionals hide their competencies or successes to prevent others from stereotyping them.

A perpetrator predation lens could account for many (if not most) workplace aggression results interpreted as evidence of “victim precipitation.” For example, researchers have argued that victims invite aggression through their incivility (Scott et al., 2013), neuroticism (Milam et al.), and low performance (Tepper et al., 2011). One could recast such findings to argue that aggressive personnel selectively target coworkers perceived as uncivil, neurotic, or underperforming. The dynamics being captured remain the same, but the perpetrator predation analytic changes their framing and interpretation. This would alter the implications of key findings. In short, perpetrator predation is a paradigm for research, offering new (arguably more progressive) ways of understanding workplace aggression.

To illustrate perpetrator predation logic, consider Eugene Kim and Theresa Glomb’s (2014) study of the victimization of high performers. Citing the victim precipitation model, they propose that “high-performing employees may instigate unfavorable upward social comparison from fellow group members (i.e., potential perpetrators), which results in harmful behaviors against high performers” (p. 620). They go on to hypothesize (and find) envy to be a mediating mechanism in these events. Such framing implicitly holds victims responsible for cognitive and emotional events taking place in the minds of others. The same process could be captured within a perpetrator predation framework. The argument would be that workgroups target high-performing colleagues for aggression, due to group members’ envy and upward social comparison. Kim and Glomb (2014, pp. 620-621) suggest as much: “Following unfavorable social comparison with high performers, other work group members may experience negative psychological states (e.g., lowered self-evaluations, emotions of envy), which results in harmful

behaviors against high performers.” The essential findings are unchanged, but causes of misbehavior are located within its instigator, not its target.

More than mere semantics, a perpetrator predation analytic shifts the focus of reform. Sticking with the same example, Kim and Glomb (2014) conclude their article by suggesting that, to reduce victimization, high-performers could try “avoiding the spotlight, downplaying accomplishments or behaving in a humble manner in their interactions with their coworkers” (p. 629). This advice holds victims accountable for heading off the hostility of colleagues, consistent with the victim precipitation model. It can also be costly, because toning down one’s outstanding performance can take that employee out of the running for important assignments, opportunities, promotions, raises, and accolades. If framed instead with a perpetrator predation lens, this study would lend itself to different practical implications. For instance, the authors could then recommend that businesses train their employees (would-be perpetrators) on how to regulate emotion – that is, how to avoid the activation of negative emotions (e.g., envy) and, if such emotions do arise, avoid the translation of negative emotion into negative behavior. This perspective places the burden of change on the person behaving badly, not the objects of that bad behavior.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have chronicled the troubled history of the victim precipitation hypothesis as it pertains to interpersonal violence. Over the last half-century, myriad studies have shown this model to be riddled with flaws, both logical and empirical. Scholars have also documented devastating consequences when notions of victim precipitation prevail, such as police ignoring evidence in sex crime investigations and juries absolving violent criminals of guilt. And yet, this model is gaining purchase in organizational science.

I would hazard a guess that many contemporary organizational scholars would find the classic work on victim precipitation (e.g., by Amir, von Hentig, Wolfgang) to be antiquated at best, and absurd or abhorrent at worst. Moreover, many would see merit in the arguments discrediting the victim precipitation model (e.g., Eigenberg & Garland, 2003; Franklin & Frankin, 1976; Meloy & Miller, 2011; Timmer & Norman, 1984; Weis & Borges, 1973), and they would be alarmed at how belief in this model distorts the criminal justice process. Echoing social scientists who came before me, I suggest that we put the ideology of victim precipitation to rest. It has no place in 21st century understandings of violence and aggression.

Certainly we can find better frameworks for investigating victimization in organizations. I have proposed one such paradigm – *perpetrator predation*. This analytic lens can offer insights into workplace aggression without blaming victims. It puts agency and control into the hands of perpetrators, letting them bear full responsibility for their actions. Importantly, this framework also suggests novel avenues to reform. My hope is that this chapter will spur new thinking about aggressive organizational behavior, including new means of combatting it. Such scholarship is vital for cultivating work environments that are safe, decent, and dignified for all.

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