

“The Valency of Victimhood: Why it matters in the workplace”

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Victimhood is a powerful phenomenon. It almost always inspires admiration and compassion. In many situations, this admiration for the victim often rises to the level of making them saints. For instance, as various media instantaneously showed us the effects of the devastating March 11, 2011, Japanese tsunami, the world's collective hearts went out to the people who were affected by such large scale destruction. With over 15,000 people dead, more than 5000 injured and the number missing topping 8000, many of us onlookers reflexively imagined that these people must be stoic saints. After all, in the wake of such a massive natural disaster, it is generally understood that the populace will face tremendous dislocation and severe deprivation for some time to come.

Even if we do not confer the status of sainthood on such victims, there is still a great deal of sympathy that is generated as a result of their plight. In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy in Japan, the Japanese Foreign Ministry reported that 128 countries, 33 international organizations and the European Union had offered assistance. In addition, millions of dollars in private donations poured in from across the globe. This outpouring of support was triggered by the sincere sympathy that other human beings felt for the people negatively impacted by this multi-billion dollar disaster. This is an almost chemical-like reaction that occurs when humans see other “innocent” humans being victimized as they were in this instance. Even when such disasters are caused by other human beings, the victims almost always instantaneously acquire a saintly aura and elicit an outpouring of sympathy.

On December 7, 1941, the country of Japan was on the other end of a major disaster. In its infamous attack on US territory in Hawaii, the Japanese military inflicted massive casualties on US forces – killing more than 2000 and wounding over 1200. The attack was a shock to the American populace, who, up until that point, had been

engaged in a vigorous debate about whether or not to enter World War II. Almost instantaneously, the fallen servicemen were raised to the level of virtual sainthood. Sympathy for them and their families was clearly evident in the American public. Not surprisingly, the United States immediately entered World War II in both the Pacific and European arenas.

Thus, in addition to admiration and compassion, we find another general almost chemical-like response to victimhood – that response is what I call the righteousness of self-defense (usually sparked by humiliation). The shock and humiliation of what the then US President Franklin D. Roosevelt called “a date which lives in infamy” called for massive retaliation in the name of self-defense. In his brief six and a half minute speech to a joint session of Congress on December 8, 1941, we see a classic example of how victimhood is a very powerful phenomenon indeed. An analysis of that famous speech is useful in our understanding of what I call the valency of victimhood that is usually based on this admiration, compassion, humiliation self-defense cycle.

First of all, he clearly framed the attack as one wherein the United States was the absolute innocent victim of Japan’s treachery. He stated:

The United States was at peace with that nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with its Government and its Emperor looking forward to maintenance of peace in the Pacific.

Then, he emphasized that this aggression was deliberate and calculated by stating that:

It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was planned many days or even weeks ago. During the intervening time, the Japanese government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace.

After establishing the important point that the United States was an absolute innocent victim of the obviously duplicitous Japanese, he deftly appeals to the understandably raw, humiliation-tinged emotions of the people of the United States by stating that “The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and will understand the implications to the very life and safety to our nation.”

With almost saintly victimhood established and the massive sympathies and righteous emotion of humiliation-driven anger aroused, he administers the call for self-defense by eloquently stating that “no matter how long it will take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their *righteous* [emphasis mine] might will win through to absolute victory. I believe I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will make very certain that this form of treachery shall never endanger us again.”

So, with this assertion of righteous inviolable self-defense, the United States of America entered World War II and, the rest, as they say, is history. However, this “good-guy versus bad-guy” drama with a “happy” victorious ending for the “good-guys” is not all there is to this story. In a major ironic subtext to the main narrative, it is the Japanese who now suddenly become victims. More specifically, Japanese Americans were victimized by the self-righteous, self-defensive, victimhood-driven posture of the United States government that catalyzed as a result of the December 7, 1941, Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. In an almost chemical-like reaction (valence) to this humiliation, the US moved from righteous victim to relentless victimizer. Consequently, in 1942, approximately 110,000 Japanese citizens with legal US status and Japanese American citizens who were living on the US Pacific coast were involuntarily placed in “War Relocation Camps.” Even the United States Supreme Court upheld President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 (February 19, 1942) that authorized “exclusion zones” set by military commanders from which, for military purposes, “any or all person may be excluded.” Although people who were either citizens of or descendants of all three Axis powers countries (i.e., Germany, Italy and Japan) were targeted and detained, it was the people of Japanese descent who bore the brunt of such wartime “self-defense” initiatives.

This point is driven home by the fact that in 1988, the United States Congress passed a law that had as its first purpose to “acknowledge the fundamental injustice of the evacuation, relocation and internment of United States citizens and permanent resident aliens of Japanese ancestry” [during World War II]. Amongst its provisions, the legislation provided for an apology to and reparations to be paid to the persons of Japanese ancestry who were citizens or resident aliens who had been negatively impacted by President Roosevelt’s Executive Order. Language in the 1988 bill signed by President Ronald Reagan asserted that the 1942 action by the US government was emblematic of “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.” So we see that in this instance, what I call the valency of victimhood at work. America’s righteous victimhood, fueled by admiration, compassion and humiliation, led to righteous self-defense and the ultimate victimizing of others in an almost chemical like, unconscious, involuntary reaction to the disaster of Pearl Harbor.

It is primarily the effects of this dark, negative underside of victimhood that will concern us in this present talk. The reason for this, as can be seen from the World War II Japanese American situation, is that the actions of people, groups and countries motivated by their victimhood can have far-reaching disastrous tsunami-like effects. Like a series of tidal waves, people caught up in the valency of victimhood are swept up a very destructive emotional whirlwind that can have very predictable and massive negative consequences.

I call this phenomenon the valency of victimhood because it seems that human reaction to massive traumatic events and/or ongoing humiliation move in a somewhat predictable pattern depending on the intensity of the events and the relative impact upon the person or persons directly or indirectly involved in the events. The American version of the Atlantic slave trade is another case in point. The Atlantic slave trade was outlawed in 1803 and slavery was abolished in the United States of America with the passage of the 13th amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865. In spite of this, more than a hundred years later, the descendants of those slaves still seem to be subject to the valency of victimhood.

As a result, some descendants of slaves see their humiliating victimhood as slaves and subsequent ongoing discrimination as almost sacred to the point that they argue that they, in particular, have certain rights over the United States of America that absolutely no other group in this country's history can ever approach. That is, slavery caused the special victimhood and humiliation due to the massive numbers involved (at least 10 million) and the span of time involved (over a couple of centuries). It is from this almost sacred position that the current arguments for reparations for descendants of those. Famously, people like Malcolm X and organizations like the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense have argued that the continued victimhood of Black people mandated that they take up arms in righteous self-defense. Again, we see the admiration, compassion, humiliation, and self-defense cycle at work.

For the purposes of this talk, I argue that the recent spike in workplace aggression is due, in part, to the valency of victimhood. As Schat and Kelloway (2003) noted:

Aggression and violence are becoming increasingly common in the workplace. In the largest U.S. survey of its kind, the U.S. Postal Service Commission on a Safe and Secure Workplace (2000) found that in 1999, 1 in 20 American workers was physically assaulted, 1 in 6 was sexually harassed, and 1 in 3 was verbally abused. The most serious form of workplace violence—homicide—has been found to be the second leading cause of workplace death (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1995)