

The Many Faces of Victimhood

This essay will explore the notion of the “culture of victimhood” depicted in the paper *Microaggression and Moral Cultures* by Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning. Campbell and Manning claim that contemporary moral culture, in contrast to historical trends in morality emphasizing either honor or dignity, has become centered around the victim, whose “moral status...has risen to new heights” (715). I argue, conversely, that victimhood has always been extolled as a characteristic of femininity¹—the change that Campbell and Manning seem to be recognizing is not the altered moral status of the victim but the altered status of men in relation to female victims. In the past, the notion of female victimhood—the “damsel in distress”—has been complemented by the figure of the masculine savior. In recent years, however, there has been increased recognition that this masculine figure is more often the villain than the hero.

In order to demonstrate the historical idealization of female victimhood, I turn to the Disney Princess movies—in particular, the first three movies, released between 1937 and 1959: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. These movies, I argue, present an ideal notion of femininity that is characterized by sensitivity and reliance on men. They each also feature a female villain, a fact which illustrates the historical denial of male-dominated systems of oppression.

¹ Campbell and Manning’s argument is not limited to women and in fact never comprehensively defines its target beyond self-identification as victim. It is important to understand that different identity groups have historically been, and continue to be, victimized in distinct and specific ways—to ignore these differences represents a major over-generalization. This essay will focus specifically on the victim status of white women, recognizing that, while different systems of oppression share certain characteristics, they each require individual analysis.

Ultimately, then, I find that Campbell and Manning’s “victimhood culture” argument has much less to do with a change in the moral status of the victim than with a change in the status of men, vis-à-vis those victims. This culture of victimhood has always existed in the realm of the feminine and has historically been a way for men to retain dominance. Thus, the dominant moral cultures of the past—honor and dignity—have represented ideals of masculinity, allowing men to retain power over their female victims. The current rise in the status of the victim represents the rejection of moral ideals that posit victimhood as failure or inadequacy.

I. Victimhood As Virtue

In their 2014 paper, Campbell and Manning posit the rise of victimhood culture based on the recent phenomenon of publicly documenting microaggressions. They make a point, in their introduction, to state that their examination of this phenomenon is morally neutral and purely scientific:

So far nearly all the discourse on microaggressions has been moralistic—either taking part in the documenting of microaggressions or reacting against it. What we offer—a social scientific analysis of the phenomenon—is different. Social science cannot tell us what position to take in the debate about microaggressions (695).

But, despite this disclaimer, their paper illustrates that social science doesn’t *have* to tell them what position to take—they’ve already taken it. They posit the documenting of microaggressions as a form of “social control”, a term that denotes “the handling of conflict”—where “conflict” is what occurs “when someone defines another’s behavior as deviant—as immoral or otherwise objectionable” (693). Social control, they note, can be

any response to deviant behavior; thus the mechanism of social control itself may be deviant—the authors cite the documentation of microaggressions alongside genocide and lynching as a social control mechanism that is also a form of deviant behavior (“a behavior that many others condemn”) (693). This is a revealing analogy in that it demonstrates a fundamental bias in the formulation of the object of analysis. Based on the authors’ own definition of microaggressions as the communication of “hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, and sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults” (693), the logical analogy would be between genocide/lynching and microaggressions themselves—microaggressions, rather than the act of documenting them, should be the focus of an analysis of deviant social control. But Campbell and Manning, seemingly unconsciously, choose to manipulate the formulation of the issue such that microaggression documenters are posited in the same category as Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan. They similarly reformulate the definition of conflict in terms that shift blame off of the initial wrongdoer and onto the accuser. Thus, from its very foundations, Campbell and Manning’s analysis is morally biased against microaggression documenters and other victims.

Microaggression documentation, according to Campbell and Manning, is part of a broader conflict strategy in which “the aggrieved” seek the support of third parties, most commonly through “complaints” aired through forms of protest. The authors cite “rallies, strikes, marches, and even terrorist acts” as examples of protests—again equating activism with criminal violence. Furthermore, they posit such methods of raising third-party awareness as “gossip”, which they define as “evaluative talk about a person who is not present” (696)—citing, for example, the “Bring Back Our Girls” campaign as

“effectively an episode of mass gossip” (711). While they define gossip in morally neutral terms, this definition is nowhere to be found in the Oxford English Dictionary.

Rather, gossip is defined as:

1. A person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character, esp. one who delights in idle talk; a newsmonger, a tattler.
2. The conversation of such a person; idle talk, trifling or groundless rumour; tittle-tattle.

Thus the term has blatantly negative connotations that not only downplay or even downright dismiss the significance of the content of such “complaints”, positing activists as frivolous, insipid, and even slightly malicious, but also is gendered in a way that perpetuates negative stereotypes of femininity.

This notion of “trifling or groundless rumour” is reflected in Campbell and Manning’s formulation of the “core logic” of tactics for gaining support: “they increase intervention by magnifying the actual or apparent severity of the conflict” (704).

Affecting an indignant, exasperated tone, the authors state:

While some aggrieved individuals increase the apparent severity [of the conflict] by documenting a larger pattern of offense, in other cases the manipulation of information is more extreme: Not content merely to publicize the offensive behavior of their adversaries, the aggrieved might exaggerate its extent or even make it up whole cloth (704).

Thus they posit microaggression documentation as a form of exaggeration, suggesting that the “larger pattern of offense” is a fabrication. Similarly, they ignore the existence of implicit bias, writing:

Some might frame an interpersonal dispute as being an intercollective one, claiming that an offense was motivated by cultural factor such as race and ethnicity even if it was not (704).

Ultimately, they place all protest tactics—including hunger strikes and protest suicides—in the same category as “hate crime hoaxes” (705), positing activists as liars and effectively suggesting that there are no real victims.

Thus Campbell and Manning refuse to acknowledge the existence of structural oppression. They claim that “all moral offense...involve some social change” (703), which leads them to conclude:

Microaggression complaints are largely about changes in stratification. They document actions said to increase the level of inequality in a social relationship—actions [referred] to as “overstratification.” Overstratification offenses occur whenever anyone rises above or falls below others in status. They include any attempts to bring about such changes, too, such as insults, slights, or any attempt to disparage or dominate another (706).

Implicit in this concept of “overstratification offenses” is the belief that, initially, everyone’s status is equal. The notion that microaggressions *change* stratification is exactly the opposite of the problem addressed by microaggression “complaints”—the existence of underlying structures of dominance that are always at play in determining social status. Ignoring the systemic nature of so-called “overstratification offenses”, Campbell and Manning posit them as infrequent and trivial deviations from a general pattern of social equality.

By overlooking the patterns of inequality that are the basis for claims of victimization, Campbell and Manning undermine such claims, painting victimhood as an inflated, overdramatized status that effectively means nothing. Hardly attempting to mask their disgust, the authors mock the supposed logic behind claims of victimhood: “Their adversaries are privileged and blameworthy, but they themselves are pitiable and blameless” (708). As evidence of the inflated moral status of the victim, they cite the trend in social science away from victim-blaming:

The moral status conferred by victimhood is evident in how social scientists describe and explain those they view as victims, leading them to engage in a kind of ‘blame analysis’ in which they reject any theories that ‘blame’ designated victims by attributing to them any causal role in their predicament...for example...they might reject the concept of victim-precipitated violence as way of understanding violence directed toward women, such as violence by men against their wives, even while accepting it as a way of understanding violence toward men, such as violence by women against their husbands (708).

If one ignores the structural oppression of women—as Campbell and Manning do—then such logic seems to (unfairly) privilege victimhood. This leads the authors to posit the rise of “a culture of victimhood in which individuals and groups display high sensitivity to slight, have a tendency to handle conflicts through complaints to third parties, and seek to cultivate an image of being victims who deserve assistance” (695).

According to Campbell and Manning, the idealization of victimhood represents “a new direction in the evolution of moral culture” (714). Modern Western society was once “a culture of honor”, which extolled “physical bravery and the unwillingness to be

dominated by anyone” (712). Characterized by violence and aggression, honor culture began to disappear as legal authority increased—eventually giving way to a new moral culture. Honor was replaced with dignity—an ideal that emphasizes “restraint and toleration”. Whereas in honor culture it was admirable to react to insults with violence, in dignity culture “it is...commendable to have ‘thick skin’ that allows one to shrug off slights and even serious insults” (713). Thus for Campbell and Manning, the rise of microaggression “complaints” suggests the disappearance of dignity culture, and its replacement with the new culture of victimhood.

This culture, however, is not new at all. Sensitivity and dependence have always been extolled as feminine ideals. Historically, however, this culture of victimhood has been restricted to women and has therefore been able to coexist alongside other moral cultures—moral cultures restricted to men. Thus, the dominant moral cultures of the past have represented exclusively masculine ideals. Historically, then, victimhood culture has served as a foil for the cultures of honor and dignity described by Campbell and Manning—their respective ideals of bravery and stoicism have been posited over and against ideals of femininity such as submissiveness and sensitivity. This historical relationship between the moral ideals of masculinity and femininity is exemplified in the narratives of the early Disney princesses.

II. Victimhood as Femininity

In the paper *Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses*, Dawn Elizabeth England, Lara Descartes, and Melissa Collier-Meek present the findings of their 2011

study examining gender stereotypes in the Disney Princess movies. Given the expansive nature of the Disney Princess franchise, a marketing strategy developed in 2001, these findings have widespread practical implications. According to England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek:

The advertising campaign aims to attract a wide audience of girls with the ultimate goal of encouraging children to personally identify with the characters so that they will purchase the associated products. The franchise now includes over 25,000 products and it contributed greatly to the rise of Disney marketing sales from \$300 million in 2001 to \$4 billion by 2008. Disney and its princess phenomenon have been identified as a powerful influence on children's media and product consumerism, contributing to a new 'girlhood' that is largely defined by gender and the consumption of related messages and products (555).

Thus while many of the narratives were conceived in a different era—and represent correspondingly outdated values and ideologies—Disney's Princess franchise has given them new life. The financial success of this endeavor is indicative of the public's willingness to accept and proliferate the gender ideals embedded in these stories—ideals which, perhaps rather obviously, perpetuate an old-school brand of sexism.

In their study, London, Descartes, and Collier-meek analyzed portrayals of gender in the Disney princess movies using a coded content approach that evaluated “the gendered characteristics of the prince and princess characters, the performance of climactic rescues by the characters, and the romantic resolution for the prince and princess characters at the end of the movie” (558). Gendered characteristics were examined quantitatively, by recording the number of scenes in which characters “(a) were

mentioned as possessing a certain characteristic or (b) exhibited the characteristic in their behavior” (558). The authors coded the following characteristics as masculine: curious about princess (“exhibiting a studious, concerned expression when looking at the princess...[which] suggested that the female had a mystique that was captivating and romantically compelling), wants to explore, physically strong, assertive, unemotional, independent, athletic, engaging in intellectual activity, inspires fear, brave, described as physically attractive (masculine), gives advice, leader. Characteristics coded as feminine were: tends to physical appearance, physically weak, submissive, shows emotion, affectionate, nurturing, sensitive, tentative, helpful, troublesome (“recorded when the character was being discussed by other characters in a way that made clear that the character had caused trouble that others were trying to solve”), fearful, ashamed, collapses crying, described as physical attractive (feminine), asks for or accepts advice or help, victim (“physical harm or abuse”).

The princesses in all nine movies exhibited more feminine than masculine characteristics, but the discrepancy was most pronounced in what the authors refer to as “the early movies”: *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. On average, the behavior of the princesses in the early films was coded as 86% feminine and 14% masculine. In these three movies, the princesses “were frequently affectionate, helpful, troublesome, fearful, tentative, and described as pretty” (562). The early princesses also demonstrated assertiveness primarily with animals and children, “[suggesting] a fairly submissive and limited way of being assertive, as if they could not assert themselves with other adults, but only when they were mothering, or with those who had less power” (562-3). Furthermore, the first three princesses were frequently shown engaging in

domestic work, which they used “variously as an expression of servitude and a way to gain love” (563). In all three movies, the princesses were “completely passive or even asleep during the final rescues” (565).

England, Descartes, and Collier-meeck concluded that all of the Disney princess movies encourage compliance with gender stereotypes by illustrating the rewards (love, status, wealth) reaped through stereotypical feminine behavior. Thus these films offer a prescriptive ideal of femininity—which, especially in the early movies, is characterized in largely the same terms that define Campbell and Manning’s notion of victimhood. Thus England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek’s findings illustrate that, contrary to Campbell and Manning’s conclusions, victimhood culture not only has a long history but also has been used, historically, to proliferate sexism.

III. Victimhood as Dominance

The fundamental difference between the victimhood culture of the early Disney princess movies and that described by Campbell and Manning is its relationship to masculinity. In the early princess movies, the villain is always female—an evil queen, stepmother, or fairy. Thus, the victimhood of the princess is not only compatible with, but actually essential to, the prince’s role as hero. Historically, then, the idealization of female victimhood has been a tool used to uphold male dominance—both by demonstrating the necessity of traditionally masculine traits and by keeping women from portraying them. Thus, the dominant moral cultures of the past—which extoll masculine characteristics—have been propped up by the existence of this secondary moral culture of victimhood.

Now, however, the concept of female victimhood no longer plays a supporting role to that of male dominance. Instead, the masculine figure has been recast—and rightfully so—as the villain. The moral idealization of masculinity, embodied in honor and dignity cultures, is revealed as a mechanism of oppression and dominance—in other words, as immoral. Thus by re-positing their victimhood in terms that undermine, rather than underscore, masculine notions of morality, women have begun to define a new morality—one in which “feminine” traits like sensitivity and dependence are no longer morally reprehensible.

Thus, in contrast to previous moral cultures, this new morality rejects the notion of victimhood as a personal failure. It is this trend towards the vindication of victimhood that Campbell and Manning interpret as its extolment—actions which can only be equated if one ignores the systems of oppression that produce victimhood. By refusing to acknowledge the structure of male dominance that underlies female victimhood, Campbell and Manning posit the vindication of victimhood as an unfair increase in status—in effect, as an overstratification offense: the very type of injustice that they spend their whole paper undermining.

Thus, ironically, the argument implicit in *Microaggression and Moral Culture* is that men are the victims of this new way of positing female victimhood. As Campbell and Manning themselves state:

Naturally, whenever victimhood (or honor, or anything else) confers status, all sorts of people will want to claim it. As clinical psychologist David J. Ley notes, the response of those labeled as oppressors is frequently to “assert that they are a victim as well” (715).

While Campbell and Manning do not explicitly describe themselves as victims, their ahistorical and illogical analysis of victimhood reveals a desperation, on their part, to exculpate themselves, and other male oppressors, from the role of perpetrator and thus to claim that they are receiving unfair treatment.

In this way Campbell and Manning actualize the “culture of victimhood” that they have just made up. Publishing more than twenty pages on the evils of microaggression documentation in a journal of comparative sociology, they themselves demonstrate every characteristic of victimhood culture that they posit: “display high sensitivity to slight,...handle conflicts through complaints to third parties, and seek to cultivate an image of being victims who deserve assistance” (695). Thus their analysis collapses under its own weight, revealing at its foundations the very logic of “social control” that it tries to attribute to microaggression documentation: “gossip and public shaming can be powerful sanctions” (698).

That their paper was published at all thus illustrates the very structures of dominance that Campbell and Manning so vehemently deny. While the Disney Princess franchise encourages female submissiveness through the illustration of the rewards of gender compliance, the publication of papers like *Microaggressions and Moral Cultures* coerces submission through the condemnation of those who dare to threaten the ultimate authority of the masculine.

Works Cited

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