Isobel Robinson-Ortiz
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"No One Bears Witness for the Witness": Why Don't We Believe Victims?

The past five years have been a watershed moment for the plight of marginalized populations in America—or, at least, for the media's attention to it. From the 2013 creation of the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement caused by the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of Treyvon Martin and the response to anti-black policies and actions[1] to the Women's March and the codification of the #MeToo movement, victims' stories of violence, oppression and defiance are being centered and shared in new, inclusive and exciting ways.

At the same time, reactionary backlashes to the rhetoric of these movements have been heavily circulated to denigrate their credibility as well as the credibility of the victims these movements represent. Notable examples include the emergence of #AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter in response to the BLM movement's focus on police brutality, and most recently, the public denigration and harassment of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford in conjunction with her testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee regarding allegations against then-Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. All of these responses purposefully attempted to minimize and detract from the experiences of victims who have firsthand knowledge of the issues at hand. They simply did not believe them.

In this paper, while focusing primarily on reactions to sexist and racist actions, I seek to find out why these reactionary backlashes happen. Why don't we believe victims of marginalization and oppression? And what can be done to ameliorate these reactions?

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[1] "Herstory."

Firstly, it may be prudent to examine why reactionary movements exist. A reactionary movement can be defined as one which "advocates the restoration of a previous state of social affairs,"[2] seeking to counteract the change to which it is reacting and revert to previous norms. Perhaps they feel threatened by social change or have something to gain by returning to things as they were before. As our existing social hegemony hinges both on white supremacy and male supremacy, complaints chipping away at both may cause alarm to those who benefit from those power structures. In order to prevent this, these groups employ a variety of victim-blaming tactics "to dehumanize other cultural groups that differ in values, beliefs, or physical characteristics to maintain [their] own political power and social control."[3]

One cause may have to do with the belief in a just world, sometimes abbreviated as BJW or called Just World Syndrome. First introduced by Michael Lerner in his 1980 book *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion*, BJW causes people to believe that the world is a generally just and fair place, where good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people. The authors of *Tipping the Scales of Justice* explain BJW's practical uses thusly:"To invest in long-term decisions (i.e., delay gratification) and to develop a moral compass that will direct a person toward pro-social behavior, that person must hold an implicit belief that hard work and self-discipline will meet with reward, while impulsive and injurious behaviors will meet with punishment."[4] In other words, it's easier to attempt a goal in the face of uncertainty if you're sure that all your hard work will pay off because you're a good person.

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[2] "Social Movement - Types of Social Movements," sec.
https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-movement/Types-of-social-movements#ref286664.
[3] Moody-Ramirez and Cole, "Victim Blaming in Twitter Users' Framing of Eric Garner and Michael Brown."
[4] Corey, Troisi, and Nicksa, "Tipping the Scales of Justice."

Of course, bad things happen to people we consider good all the time, as a matter of statistical necessity, and when this happens, the Just World believer is confronted with the illogical, paradoxical nature of their 'delusion,' as characterized by Lerner. This can be upsetting to process and can prompt negative reactions in the believer, which then lead them to disbelieve or otherwise disbelieve the victim. One of the most common reactions is to victim-blame or to assign the victim some or all responsibility for the oppressive incident(s). In the context of BJW, if the victim in question had something bad happen to them, then they must have done something to invite or somehow deserve their misfortune—the "impulsive and injurious behaviors" mentioned above. To the just world believer, as the sadly common adage goes, the victim 'had it coming'.

For survivors of sexual violence, the process of reporting their abuse can be incredibly fraught and possibly retraumatizing, thanks to the pervasive myth of 'Ideal Victim.' This limits the legitimacy of the survivor's claims or complaints based on details or extenuating circumstances, regardless of their relevance, that would make outward observers doubt her. Common agents include the previous legal record of the victim, their behavior just prior to or surrounding the event, and the manner in which it is reported. If any of these details are unseemly to outside observers, the survivor can be deemed as partly at fault. As a result of these factors 'moving the goalpost,' "the 'ideal victim' myth often works to undermine the credibility of those women who are seen to deviate too far from stereotypical notions of 'authentic' victims, and from what are assumed to be 'reasonable' victim responses."[5] It would stand to reason, then,

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[5] Randall, "Sexual Assault Law, Credibility, and 'Ideal Victims.'"

that the belief in a just world itself can be diminished in women who have "experienc[ed] sexist events."[6]

Survivors of racialized violence, particularly victims of anti-black police violence, are also hurt by the Ideal Victim myth. The racialized Ideal Victim in this context is disparaged similarly to victims of sexual violence by the reporting of details about the victims that would otherwise seem irrelevant. In the example of Treyvon Martin, media reports often suggested, both covertly and overtly, that Martin's attire on the night of his death, a hoodie sweatshirt, was responsible for the incident.[7] In addition to this, victims have to combat the specter of stereotyping that preys upon very old, deeply-ingrained prejudices. These prejudices imply that African-Americans, especially African-American men, are ignorant or predisposed toward violence,[8] and therefore deserving of the violence visited upon them.

As a society that emphasizes empathy in its underpinnings, why would this reaction be so common?

[6] Corey, Troisi, and Nicksa, "Tipping the Scales of Justice."
[7] Moody-Ramirez and Cole, "Victim Blaming in Twitter Users' Framing of Eric Garner and Michael Brown."
[8] Moody-Ramirez and Cole.

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