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## **The rhetorical complexity of competitive and common victimhood in conversational discourse**

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## Abstract

Much current research on collective victimhood acknowledges the role of rhetoric but does not fully address the implications for micro-level variation in personal expressions of victimhood. The focus has tended to be on individual differences in collective victimhood construals where people may either see their group as the sole possessor of victim-status or may incorporate other groups into an inclusive category. While recent research sees a strategic element in some “inclusivity”, we argue that all claims of victimhood are strategic. By using a discursive approach, we show variability in the expression of victimhood and how this accomplishes different activities in conversations. Several focus groups consisting of victims from Northern Ireland were analysed to identify presentations of victimhood and their relation to the unfolding dynamics of the conversation. We demonstrate that presentation of victimhood is an interactional concern, link this to the concept of “needs” and suggest implications this might have.

Keywords: victimhood, intergroup relations, collective victimhood, rhetorical psychology, discursive psychology

Much current research into collective victimhood, while acknowledging the role of rhetoric, methodologically places it on the sidelines. Such research tends to focus on the cognitive aspects of victimhood rather than exploring the ways in which it is articulated and the functions thereof. In consequence, while inter-personal variability of victimhood-beliefs is explored, the intra-personal and intra-group variation in how victimhood-beliefs are expressed is not adequately addressed. However, focussing on the rhetoric of victimhood gives insight into the variability and complexity of it at a micro-level of analysis. Discursive and rhetorical psychology has pointed out that expressing attitudes and beliefs is rarely stable and that people vary what they say depending on how they want to present themselves and what they want to accomplish (Billig, 1987; McKinlay & McVittie, 2009; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In other words, discourse about beliefs is functional (oriented towards a goal) and rhetorical (the goal is an argumentative one). In this paper we suggest that collective victimhood is no different. While it is helpful to outline interpersonal differences in construals of victimhood and to examine links with various outcomes, discursive expressions of victimhood must be seen as rhetorical and thus variable within persons and groups. An unexplored question in the study of victimhood then is, to what rhetorical ends is collective victimhood employed and to what extent does this vary depending on the conversational context? In answering this question, it will be helpful to begin by surveying some forms of collective victimhood currently identified in the literature and in turn explore how these may be reconceptualised as discursive and rhetorical accomplishments.

### **Competitive victimhood**

One way of categorizing victim beliefs is to show that people may be competitive in their understanding of their victimhood in relation to the other conflict group(s) (Noor, Brown,

Gonzalez, Manzi, & Lewis, 2008; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008; Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, &

Nadler, 2012). Victimhood is a symbolic resource that groups compete over as they claim to be the only legitimate victim or that they have suffered most. It does not matter that some groups may be quite easily identifiable as perpetrators – even they can identify as victims (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, et al., 2008). In the context of Northern Ireland, Hamber and Kelly (2005, p. 18) point out that victims often claim to be the “real” victims and that due to an hierarchy of victimhood, their needs have been neglected. Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, et al. (2008) suggest that this sense of being the true victim may arise out of the need to have the group’s suffering acknowledged and that this mindset hinders reconciliation. Studies have confirmed this negative link to prosocial outcomes in a variety of contexts: in Chile (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, et al., 2008), Northern Ireland (Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008), Kosovo (Andrighetto, Mari, Volpato, & Behluli, 2012) and Israel/Palestine (Shnabel, Halabi, & Noor, 2013). But negative outcomes are not our focus here. Rather, it is important to notice that competitive victimhood is functional: it is a symbolic resource to get suffering acknowledged and to gain political advantages (Smyth, 1998). Noor et al. (2012) give several other psychological functions of competitive victimhood: increasing ingroup cohesiveness, justification of violence, denial of responsibility, avoidance of negative group emotions, requests for compensation and recruitment of moral and material support from third parties. For each of these psychological functions, the discursive expression can be understood in rhetorical terms.

Firstly, increasing ingroup cohesiveness is a function of competitive victimhood because it clearly defines and unites a suffering ingroup while identifying a perpetrating outgroup (Ignatieff, 1993; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008). Leaders can use narratives about past suffering to bind group members together as common victims and this can extend to the unification of

generations through the experience of vicarious victimhood (Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson, & Schmader, 2006). As older generations tell the narratives of the past conflict to the younger generation, they also begin to share vicariously in the suffering of the past and this unites people. Yet the process by which the sense of victimhood is perpetuated is discursive and occurs in the discourse of leaders and older generations. These narratives must be framed in rhetorical ways because they are competitive and seek to argue against the other side's narrative while justifying the ingroup narrative. The cohesiveness that then emerges can be understood as sharing the same general arguments about ingroup suffering and outgroup perpetration. This is the case in Northern Ireland where community leaders actively seek a coherent collective memory as a means of strengthening ingroup identity and providing a hermeneutic for contemporary events (McAuley, 2016).

Secondly, competitive victimhood justifies violence against the outgroup. The group can exaggerate ingroup vulnerability (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003) and stir up emotions such as humiliation (Goldman, 2008; Jones, 2006; Lindner, 2001) and fear (Halperin, Bar-Tal, Nets-Zehngut, & Drori, 2008) which have action-tendencies (Frijda, 1987; Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000) towards violence. Yet justification for violence through appealing to victimisation is rhetorical – a point made by Vollhardt (2009, p. 138). If fear, humiliation and a sense of vulnerability are used to justify violence, it is in the context of arguing against a non-violent perspective.

Thirdly, denial of responsibility and the avoidance of negative group emotions are ways in which competitive victimhood functions (Noor et al., 2012, p. 9). These are linked because the idea of “collective guilt” (Klein, Licata, & Pierucci, 2011; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008) is often minimised among groups to deny responsibility for past actions (Cehajic, Brown, & Gonzalez,

2009). But the acceptance or denial of responsibility is rhetorical and if victimhood functions to deny responsibility for past actions then it will do so rhetorically. A victimised group might argue that because they are victims they are not responsible for their crimes since they acted in self-defence.

Fourthly, requests for compensation and recruitment of moral and material support are ways of using victimhood to compete with another group (Manzi & González, 2007). This is significant in post-conflict societies where compensation may be available for past suffering. Groups may compete over past suffering to generate a greater sense of entitlement. While the conflict might have ceased in terms of physical violence, it still rages in terms of gaining resources. The groups may present themselves as having suffered most and thus as being innocent and worthy of support (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). These are arguments from victimhood for material benefits.

For all the functions of competitive victimhood a clear rhetorical significance can be identified. The construction of competitive victimhood within discourse serves the rhetorical function of arguing for various entailments such as violence or material support or acknowledgement. While a similar point is made by Noor et al. (2012) when they say that group leaders can “construct a discourse that revolves around CV [competitive victimhood]” (p. 3), the variability of such discourses is not developed and variability is conceptualised primarily in terms of inter-individual variation. We argue that while there are individual differences, more attention could be given to rhetorical variation within discourse at the micro-level of analysis.

### **Inclusive victim consciousness**

Another way of categorising victim beliefs is to point out that not all victims compete with other victims over status; they may see other victims as sharing victimhood. According to

Vollhardt (2009, 2015), inclusive victim consciousness is the sense that others have suffered similarly to one's group (although it may not be the conflict outgroup). This draws on Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003) which postulates that events can be represented more specifically or abstractly and this will affect who is included in the experience. Thus victimhood can be construed narrowly (an exclusive victim consciousness which aligns somewhat with the concept of competitive victimhood) or more broadly (in which one sees other groups across the world as having suffered from similar experiences). Noor et al. (2012) propose a related concept, common victimhood identity, in which the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993) is used to show that different groups can be recategorised into a higher-order ingroup with corresponding changes in inter-group relations. In the case of victim groups, two opposing groups may recategorise themselves into an overarching group of victims of the conflict despite differing roles.

There are emotional and behavioural consequences of holding inclusive beliefs. Seeing other sufferers as part of a common ingroup can lead to empathy (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987), sympathy/liking (Karylowski, 1976) and emotional solidarity (Yzerbyt, Dumont, Wigboldus, & Gordijn, 2003). This can lead to prosocial actions on behalf of other victims (e.g. Catholic Nationalists in Northern Ireland supporting the plight of Palestinians; Vollhardt, 2009). Similarly, with the related concept of common victimhood identity, which is focussed on the conflict outgroup, there are important prosocial outcomes. Recategorising one's own victim-group and the outgroup victims as part of a shared identity leads to increased forgiveness and desire for reconciliation (González, Manzi, & Noor, 2011; Noor, Brown, Taggart, Fernandez, & Coen, 2010).

Even in the case of this more prosocial form of victimhood, we want to argue that the rhetorical dimension is important. After conducting research in Northern Ireland which found no relationship between competitive victimhood and inclusive victimhood (although they should, theoretically, have been inversely correlated), Cohrs, McNeill, & Vollhardt (2015) argued that inclusivity may be used strategically. Follow-up studies confirmed that there were both “selective” and “universal” forms of inclusivity. In the former, participants would align themselves with partisan causes (e.g. Catholics in Northern Ireland with Palestinians; Protestants with Israelis) whereas in the latter, the universal form of inclusivity, participants would align themselves with suffering groups because of their suffering, and not for partisan reasons. Selective inclusivity correlated with competitive victimhood whereas universal inclusivity correlated with desire for reconciliation. The authors argue that, “expressing shared victimization with other groups may be used strategically to strengthen the ingroup’s position in an intergroup conflict” (p. 634) – a point with which we concur. Victimhood, even in inclusive forms, can be used strategically. Yet even here, while showing individual differences in how forms of inclusivity can be used, we argue that more can potentially be said about temporal variability within individuals’ expressions of inclusivity. There is nothing to prevent selective and universal forms of inclusivity being used by the same person or group at different times.

### **What motivates victimhood?**

Having argued that victimhood is rhetorical, strategic and functional, one is led to ask, “What motivates victimhood”? In one sense, the desired goals (material compensation, justification of violence, acknowledgement, etc.) motivate the way victimhood is expressed, but is there anything deeper than this? One suggestion is that expressions of victimhood are motivated by human needs. It is argued that victims have had needs for safety, security, positive



relations, esteem, and sense of control frustrated – to name only a few (ten Boom & Kuijpers, 2012). Similarly, Joyce and Lynch (2015) have argued the importance of affirmative needs and the need for certainty. The idea has been empirically tested by Shnabel & Nadler (2008) who suggested that after conflicts, perpetrators and victims will have different needs. Because perpetrators will have caused harm and will look bad in the eyes of the world, they will need to have their positive moral image restored. On the other hand, victims do not need their image restored (they are accepted as being innocent) but will need to have their sense of self-efficacy restored. Differential needs will require different approaches to their satisfaction. Shnabel & Nadler (2008) found that in manipulating the messages exchanged between “perpetrators” and “victims” (in hypothetical scenarios), victims who gave a message of acceptance (denoting positive morality) to perpetrators, and perpetrators who gave a message of empowerment (denoting agency) to victims were both more willing to reconcile with the other. Further studies show that this effect occurs even when the agent who delivers the acceptance/empowerment message is a neutral third party but mutual trust is increased more when delivered by the other conflict party (Shnabel, Nadler, & Dovidio, 2014). They suggest that this is a good example of what reconciliation actually entails: an “exchange” of symbolic resources which fulfils the needs of the other. Thus intergroup reconciliation must remove emotional barriers that block successful resolution of the conflict (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008).

The needs-based model of reconciliation (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008) ties in with competitive victimhood (Noor et al., 2012). Why do people engage in competitive victimhood? One reason is that it satisfies an emotional need. When the victimised group argue that they have suffered more than the other group, other groups respond by expressing empathy, support and recognition of their suffering. The victimised group can also

appeal to the perpetrator to recognise their suffering and offer some form of compensation. Both of these cases grant the fulfilment of the need for power in the victimised group. The perpetrator group can also engage in competition over victimhood. As they argue that they have suffered more, they draw attention to their suffering and mitigate their guilt. This fulfils their need for moral acceptance (Noor et al., 2012, p. 10).

Of course there is often ambiguity with regards to who is guilty and who is innocent; who is the perpetrator and who is the victim. Nevertheless, Noor et al. (2012, p.11) hold that there are good reasons for speaking about some degree of asymmetry. Firstly, there may be asymmetric power relations such that one group is structurally more powerful than another. Both groups may compete over victimhood so that different needs may be satisfied. Secondly, when specific incidents are discussed from the past there is often an asymmetry which both groups recognise. Some groups may feel responsible for perpetrating certain incidents and may feel victimised because of other incidents. This prompts both groups to engage in competitive victimhood to satisfy different needs that arise as a result of different incidents being made salient.

What must be remembered is that the normal way for these events to be made salient is through conversation and argument: they are made discursively salient. While Noor et al. (2012, p. 10) address the role of discourse and arguments on the part of those who meet the needs of victims (e.g. through “expressions of empathy” and “justifying their aspiration[s]”), less attention is paid to the role of victims in making their needs salient. But victims are often active in making their needs known. And as this is conducted discursively, the satisfaction of a particular need can also be a discursive satisfaction. In other words, the “need” can be conceptualised rhetorically (i.e. gaining the upper hand in the argument) and its satisfaction can be conceptualised rhetorically (i.e. being vindicated in the argument). This fits perfectly with the discursive notion

of variability (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Potter, 1998) which maintains that attitudes are not necessarily stable but vary depending on the rhetorical context. Thus the way competitive victimhood is argued can vary and the reason for its maintenance will vary depending on the context. This is seen to some extent in the work of Ferguson, Burgess, & Hollywood (2010) in Northern Ireland who suggestively note that some of their participants wanted to present themselves as being resilient and so did not identify individually as victims. Nevertheless, they identified as part of a victimised group which gave them a label of power. While the authors did not make the link with rhetoric (they used a phenomenological approach), we would argue that there is rhetorical significance to this distinction.

### **Forms of victimhood as rhetorical and variable**

This then, is the point we have been driving towards: forms of victimhood can be seen as strategic positions; these positions are rhetorical; and as rhetorical positions, they vary depending on the goal that is being aimed at. Furthermore, the concept of needs is helpful insofar as it points out that forms of victimhood are used to satisfy rhetorical “needs” of the speaker. In essence, we are striving for a rhetorical conception of victimhood in order to show its strategic nature and potential variability in contrast to research which has focussed on inter-individual variability rather than at the micro-level of discourse. In this paper, we draw on interviews with groups of victims to show that, depending on the conversational demands, participants may vary their expression of victimhood, and this with clear strategic goals. We must however, make a clarification: By arguing for the rhetorical nature of victimhood we are not seeking to discount the actual experiences of victims. We are pointing out that whether or not a person (or group) identifies as a victim is bound up with rhetoric; the act of claiming victimhood is a rhetorical act. Similarly, we are not trying to discount the felt needs of those who have suffered trauma and loss

as mere rhetoric (see Billig, 1987, p.62 for more on the idea of “mere rhetoric”). We

acknowledge real experiences and real suffering. But we are pointing out that talking about needs requires rhetorically constructing those needs, utilising them in specific circumstances and for specific ends. And while we argue that these ends can be rhetorical (e.g. acknowledgement of suffering or affirmation of agency), there is often an extra-linguistic element to these (i.e. the payment of compensation may be the way in which acknowledgement of suffering is enacted). In short, we are not trying to reduce the experience of victimhood to “mere rhetoric” but rather, seeking to show the role of rhetoric in claiming specific forms of victimhood, at specific times and for specific ends.

### **Research context**

The research reported in this paper was conducted in Northern Ireland, which has a long history of violent conflict. The main protagonists are commonly designated as Protestants (usually Unionists who desire continued alliance with the United Kingdom, of which they are a part) and Catholics (usually Nationalists who desire alliance with the Republic of Ireland in the South). While these delineations can be useful, it is also worth noting that there is some degree of intra-group variability (Ferguson & Gordon, 2007). The more militant counterparts of both these groups are Loyalists and Republicans respectively. While most physical violence has abated with the signing of the 1998 peace agreement and subsequent power-sharing arrangements, segments of more militant groups have continued to use sporadic violence. Victimhood therefore, is rife in Northern Ireland. It is estimated that over 3 600 people were killed and around 40 000 injured since the Troubles commenced (Manktelow, 2007). Despite this, most people in Northern Ireland do not think of themselves as victims and only around 12% think of themselves as victims regularly (Cairns, Mallett, Lewis, & Wilson, 2003). Nevertheless,

the number of people who have experienced victimisation is much higher (Brewer & Hayes, 2011) and the theme of “victimhood” is prominent in public discourse (Gilligan, 2003). Clearly there are complex factors that affect identification with the label of “victim” and the rhetorical implications of the label are part of this. Those who do identify as victims have often formed themselves into smaller “victim groups” for support and campaigning purposes. It was to these victim groups that we turned for discussion about their victimhood.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

We conducted a series of three focus groups, two interviews and one dual-interview. We had two Protestant-Unionist focus groups (5 members of Mourne Action for Survivors of Terrorism, MAST, lasting 1 hour and 15 minutes, Males=2, Females=3; and 5 members of Families Acting for Innocent Relatives, FAIR, lasting 1 hour and 13 minutes, M=3, F=2), one Catholic-Nationalist (8 members of Ballymurphy victims lasting 1 hour and 16 minutes, M=4, F=4), one non-aligned interview (WAVE Trauma Centre lasting 31 minutes, M=1), one Protestant-Unionist interview (at FAIR, lasting 37 minutes, M=1) and one Republican ex-prisoner dual interview (with Coiste na nIarchimí, lasting 31 minutes, M=2). The latter group was an ex-prisoners group which may seem unusual given that we were examining victims. However, such people are categorised as victims legally in Northern Ireland and we did not want to make an a priori decision about who was and who was not a victim. In the analysis below we report extracts from the MAST and Ballymurphy focus groups and the dual interview with Coiste because they show the clearest examples of variability in the data and in the case of

Coiste, the clearest example of responding to a threatened sense of morality (because it is an ex-prisoners' group rather than a victims' group).

### **Materials**

The interviews and focus groups were conducted with the aid of an interview schedule that covered questions such as, "Do you feel that other people in your community are listening to the voices of victims?", "Do you think that some victims or some groups of victims are receiving more attention than others? Or are all victims being treated equally?", and "What should the rest of society be doing about victims?". At the start of the interview, participants were told that the interviewer was conducting research on the subject of victimhood in Northern Ireland and wanted to hear the views of victims after having conducted extensive analysis of the views of politicians. Also at the start, some interviews and focus groups received an article from a local newspaper about the needs of victims to prompt some discussion but this was merely an icebreaker and tended not to be referred to after the initial reading. These materials and the entire study was approved by the Ethics Committee at the university where the research was conducted.

### **Procedure**

Emails were sent to numerous victims' groups inviting them to a focus group "to discuss the current state of victim issues in Northern Ireland". After initial contact with the groups, the first author arranged a suitable time and place to meet the groups/individuals. This was always conducted on their own premises and not at an academic institution. After introducing himself, the researcher asked permission to record the discussion for transcription purposes and began the recording. Throughout the discussions, the aim was to cover the topics in a semi-structured fashion and to allow participants to talk freely about what they thought was important. Inasmuch as was possible, the interviewer presented himself as sympathetic to the group's concerns to

facilitate more openness in the discussion (Merton, 1972). If the purpose of the interviews was to uncover naturally occurring rhetoric, it would be unsuitable for the interviewer to appear as a complete outsider (which could be an obvious prompt to engage in justification of the group). While “doing similarity” may not always work (Abell, Locke, Condor, Gibson, & Stevenson, 2006), if it is properly received by the recipient, it may be effective in encouraging more openness.

Following the interviews, data was transcribed and marked to indicate emphases (underlined text).

### **Analytic method**

As outlined in the introduction, our perspective was one of rhetorical or discursive psychology which has as its focus, the functions of discourse (Billig, 1987; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Potter, 1996). This meant that we were constantly asking, “What are participants doing by saying something?” Another key concept was that discourse is variable and this has been explored by Potter & Wetherell (1987) and Billig (1987) who offer striking examples of how variable discourse can vary depending on what the speaker is arguing for. In one instant Maoris can be described as a “lazy race” by participants and in the next as “such hard-working people” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 125). Again, a participant with “strong views” about the monarchy can both support and contest such a structure (Billig, 1989). More recently, variability has been studied in relation to issues as diverse as the expression of gender as a presentation of self (Wetherell & Edley, 2014), authoritarian and non-authoritarian responses to questions about right-wing authoritarianism (Gray & Durrheim, 2013), and clinical psychologists’ constructions of mental health (Lofgren, Hewitt, & das Nair, 2015). Furthermore, in political discourse in Northern Ireland, speakers have been found to vary their claims of being a minority or majority

depending on the context (Stevenson, Condor, & Abell, 2007). These studies differ with regards to the issues in which they explore variability but all stress that these variations are rhetorically motivated. In our case, to explore variability in expressions of victimhood, we paid careful attention to how group boundaries were being defined and in what contexts this was occurring. Interviewers were coded to indicate where different constructions of victimhood occurred (i.e. inclusive or exclusive forms) and then differences within interviews were highlighted. Our goal was not merely to point out that variability does occur (that is well-established) but to show why it occurs and what functions it serves. By demonstrating the functions we can then make some links between the concept of needs and the functions of victimhood-framing in conversations. Therefore, after identifying the forms of victimhood and variability within interviews, we carefully read the interviews to explore the context in which the expression of victimhood occurred, what conversational demands led to the framing of victimhood in that way, and what kind of outcome was obtained by framing victimhood thus.

## **Analysis and findings**

### **Variability in a Unionist group**

If a common victim identity is bound up with notions of similarity in terms of suffering, then one way of exploring identity in the discussions is to look for how the participants treat similarity and difference. If there is variability here, then we can argue that there is variability in how the category of victim is being treated. In this section, we explore the discussion of the MAST focus group, a Unionist group from County Down.



In one section of the focus group, the group argues that Protestant and Catholics are different in their approach to victimhood. This emerges in a discussion (Extract 1) about one woman who calls herself a “survivor” and not a “victim”.

## Extract 1

1 D: And the same people’s saying... I know a man that has been shot and

2 his wife doesn’t think she’s a victim.

3 B: She’ll correct ye and tell you, “I’m a survivor”

4 [...]

5 D: And that’s the way the people, people down here’s very private. Very

6 very private. You know, and I’ll tell you about the people here too, they don’t go

7 looking for things

8 I: Yea

9 B: They’re too proud.

10 D: They’re too proud. They’ll not run lookin for benefits. We’ve a

11 woman who can do all the benefits that... there’s not. I think she’s one person.

12 I: Yea

13 D: Over all the years comin here lookin for benefits. That’s the sort of

14 people down here. They’ll not run... they think they’re takin it off the state. You

15 know, and that’s why they don’t do it.

16 I: Yea

17 D: You know, where the other side would take the arm off ya - and know

18 how to get all the benefits. You know.

The group attributes this denial of the label “victim” to her character as a “private” (line 5) person who represents her community’s characteristics by not seeking benefits. Two reasons are attributed by the speaker for why this woman does not identify as a victim. Firstly, he takes the woman as representative of the population of the area and says firstly that the “people down here” are “very private” (line 5). Secondly, “the people here... don’t go looking for things” (lines 6-7). This is in direct contrast to “the other side” who “would take the arm off ya” (line 17). This may be drawing on broader stereotypes of the other community which the speaker then uses to construct difference between the communities. But this emphasis on the difference between Protestants and Catholics with reference to their victimhood is not always maintained and differences and similarities are invoked for their rhetorical effect. While stereotypes might undergird such statements, the discursive activation of these stereotypes is not random but is oriented towards a particular effect.

Towards the end the interviewer asked the group about their involvement with the wider community. However, the word “community” got taken up as a reference to “cross-community” work which initiated a discussion about the relationship between Catholics and Protestants in the group. There was a lengthy section where the group explain why there are no Catholics (except one partner of a member) in the group. One explanation was that it just so happened that the majority of deaths in that area had been Protestant which then explains why the group is made up of Protestants. The interviewer then ventured to suggest that the nature of victimhood for Catholics and Protestants was different because the two communities were so separated from each other. But this suggestion actually encountered some resistance. This seems to be because the comments were leading in the direction of saying that the group would not include Catholic victims because they were different from Protestants. Or to put it another way, the comments

seem to be taken as a kind of sectarianism which would reflect badly on the group given their

efforts to explain that the reason for the lack of Catholics in their group was not sectarian. A says,

“You know it’s not anything divisive that we’re tryin to do.” Again, E stresses, “It’s not sectarian.”

Against this backdrop of arguing against sectarian tendencies in the group, the interviewer’s comments in Extract 2 are challenged:

Extract 2

1 I: And the nature

2 C: Yea yea yea

3 I: Of the deaths of the Protestant side are different from the nature of the  
4 deaths, even innocent deaths,

5 A: Yea

6 I: On the Catholic side

7 A: Hmm

8 C: Hm?

9 I: Even innocent death o- deaths on the Catholic side very often the  
10 nature of them, are different

11 C: I mean I eh like I I I mean yes well I dunno how to say this like  
12 certainly there has been Catholics been murdered, you know

13 I: Yea

14 C: By loyalists - I don’t agree with that either you know I don’t you  
15 know I mean they are just

- 16           A: Innocent mistaken identity and things
- 17           C: They're just, they're innocent just the same as we're you know
- 18           A: Yep
- 19           I: But that's different
- 20           C: Is it?
- 21           I: I'm not sayin it's differ-, but I would feel that that would be like a
- 22   different kind of victimhood almost? Because Northern Ireland has been so
- 23   segregated Catholic and Protestant communities have been so different and
- 24   obviously with the relatives in the Police force
- 25           C: I I honestly I don't know why ...

While initially, C enthusiastically agrees with what the interviewer says by saying “Yea” repeatedly throughout line 2, she stops when it appears that he is going against the anti-sectarian nature of the argument. So in line 7 A gives a thoughtful/uncertain “hmm” which seems to indicate that she is unsure of what has been said and C gives a questioning “Hm?” (line 8). This indicates that the sentence has taken an unexpected turn in the overall flow of the argument and she seeks clarification.

After seeking clarification, the interviewer then repeats his statement in similar language in lines 9-10. In response to this, C points out that there are actually Catholics who are “just the same as we're you know” (line 17). To this he continues to press his point by saying, “But that's different” (line 19). However, the only response is, “Is it?” This is not accusatory but more questioning so he tries to provide an explanation in lines 21-24 but in 25, C expresses her lack of understanding as to why there is segregation in Northern Ireland. She seems to be implying that

the segregation is meaningless to some extent. This leads her to explain how she actually has a

Catholic friend who is also a victim.

Extract 3

- 1           C: I have a friend who is a Roman Catholic and I mean, and a very  
2    very good friend like I don't dis- I would still be, have friends and he, she is a  
3    friend you know really a very good friend and she's has gone through the  
4    same thing as me, you know what I mean. But maybe if she hadn't have went  
5    through the same thing as me we wouldn't have the same thing in common if  
6    you know what I mean.

In Extract 3, C explains that she has a Catholic friend with the same experience of victimhood. The fact that they have both had the same experience means that they have something in common. Thus, by the use of this personal experience, C nullifies the interviewer's point that the Catholic experience is necessarily different. Furthermore, the use of her personal experience to make this claim of similarity strengthens it and makes it difficult to contest since it is a private experience (see Wiggins & Potter, 2003 for a discussion of the function of subjective claims in discourse). She then goes on to talk about what happened to her friend and her relationship with her friend. She reaches her main point beginning at line 1 of Extract 4:

Extract 4

- 1           C: But we both  
2           A: You've still lost somebody close  
3           E: It's not because  
4           C: We both still lost somebody close. It's not a Catholic and

5 Protestant thing

6 E: It's not a Catholic Protestant thing it's the loss

7 B: It's the fact that you've both lost

8 C: It's the fact that we've both lost

The conclusion of her argument is that her experience of victimhood could be shared with a Catholic (they “both still lost somebody close”, line 4) and therefore, victimhood is “not a Catholic and Protestant thing” (lines 4-5). The echoing of the speakers as they repeat what each other says indicates that they are all agreeing and lending their own voices as a form of solidarity. At the start of this part of the focus group the interviewer had suggested that there were significant differences between Catholics and Protestants. But this view was not accepted by the group and ran counter to their argument that the lack of Catholics in the group was not sectarian. Therefore, C argues that her friend serves as a good example of a Catholic who was a fellow-victim who had the same experience of victimhood. This dismantles the interviewer's contention that there was a Protestant-Catholic divide in victimhood.

But how does this fit with other statements in the group that were sectarian? For example, the group engage in discussing how the difference in uptake of benefits in the two communities reflected badly on “the other side”. Why does no member of the group dissent from that apparent sectarianism?

We think the best answer to explain why both sectarian and non-sectarian views of victimhood are found co-existing is that rhetorical variability shapes the expression of victimhood beliefs (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 49). This variability occurs because rhetorical contexts change and with those changes comes the need to argue differently. In some contexts, the group argue in a sectarian way to show the noble nature of Protestants. In other contexts, the

group argue for a similarity of experience between Protestants and Catholics to show that the group is not sectarian. Either way, the group is rhetorically motivated to present themselves and their group in a good light. Sometimes that requires seemingly opposing strategies. It can be seen that ways of constructing victimhood – shared or not shared – are rhetorically driven.

### **Variability in a Nationalist group**

Another illustration of variability in constructing victimhood comes from the Ballymurphy group in which there is a tension between acknowledging all victims and arguing that some victims merit special attention. In other words, there is a tension between “inclusive/common victimhood” and “competitive victimhood”. After talking at length about how victims are treated differently and how victims of state violence are neglected, the interviewer raised the question of the definition of a victim in lines 2-5 of Extract 5. This leads E to respond in line 8 that “Everybody’s a victim.”

#### Extract 5

- 1           I: Yea. Another thing that leads to differences in the way victims is -  
2       victims are treated as you mentioned was, the definition of a victim, and some  
3       Unionist politicians have got this definition of a victim which almost excludes  
4       anybody that wasn’t harmed by the IRA em how do you feel about the way  
5       definitions of victims have been treated?  
6           A: We we believe that any victims, as I says earlier on, any victims  
7           E: Everybody’s a victim  
8           A: Everybody, everybody’s a victim and everybody’s entitled to truth  
9       and everybody’s entitled to justice no matter who you are

10 I: Yea

11 E: But there's-You can't have an hierarchy of victims

12 I: Yea

13 E: you just can't it's just impossible because at the end of the day, you  
14 find a lot of these people, like you take the killings in Ballymurphy,

15 I: Yea

16 E: it was probably the biggest thing for the IRA. The people probably  
17 joined because their neighbours and there were getting gunned down and  
18 murdered

19 I: Yep

20 E: and they felt powerless. Same in an- in any area, probably the  
21 Protestant community as well, some of them took up arms because they felt  
22 the Catholics were trying to murder their loved ones. And that's just the way it  
23 is. And you can't, you can't hold their families to ransom because of what they  
24 done as well

25 I: Yep

26 E: Because at the end of the day, if an IRA man or a UVF man was  
27 shot dead doin something wrong, you can't say to their family, "Oh because  
28 your son was this or that you can't, you can't be a part of this process." They  
29 are a part of this process.

30 I: Yea

31 E: Because we all are. We're all victims of this. This happened to us.



The interviewer's question at the start of Extract 5 sets up the context because it identifies "some Unionist politicians" as being responsible for a definition which would be primarily about caring for their own victims. Against this backdrop, both A and E say that "everybody" is a victim. Clearly they are not referring to everyone in Northern Ireland but seem to be referring to everyone who has been harmed. This leads E to say that "You can't have an hierarchy of victims" (line 13). This is a common expression among people in Northern Ireland and both sides object to "an hierarchy of victims" for various reasons. Following this, E advances her explanation for why there cannot be an hierarchy in lines 11-31. In line 13, E says that an hierarchy is "impossible" because "at the end of the day..." With this latter expression, she aims to draw attention to a state of affairs that will exist regardless of which approach is taken. The expression aims to avoid controversy by pointing to a common outcome which needs to be considered. The outcome is that "you find a lot of these people" may actually have become perpetrators as a result of the victimhood.

E avoids getting bogged down in specific details by using the term "probably" frequently in lines 16-28. People "probably" joined the IRA because they felt powerless and Protestants "probably" did the same sort of thing. She concludes that summary of events by saying, "And that's just the way it is" (lines 22-23). Those words have the same inescapable sense of reality to them as the expression "at the end of the day" which together combine to argue that because a lot of people probably did this, then we cannot exclude their families from being victims.

One effect of the parallels she draws between the Protestant and Catholics in lines 20-24 is that both sides share to some extent in the responsibility for harming each other. Consequently, in line 29 she can argue that even those who have had loved ones injured as a result of being

involved in violence, they too “are part of this process”. She can talk about “this” in 31 as the mutually harming event which happened to “us”.

Clearly the inclusivity proposed occurs in an argumentative context – note, for example, the quotation of argument-opponents in lines 27-28 who are invoked as a way of positioning the speaker against them. But what is the rhetorical function for this inclusivity of victimhood? Because the interviewer’s question at the start of the extract was framed in terms of the potential exclusion of non-IRA victims, the argument seeks to ensure that this group (the Ballymurphy group) is not excluded. In this context the focus is on the similarity of all victims. But in another context, the group is happy to argue for an “hierarchy” of sorts even though they disavow the name. Towards the end of the focus group G returns to the issue of hierarchy (Extract 6).

## Extract 6

- 1           G: I’m maybe goin back a wee bit on you here, but regarding the  
2    victims things, when there’s a conflict there’s victims on all sides of it
- 3           I: Yea
- 4           G: But the thing about the truth and why it needs to be it’s the  
5    innocent victims. It’s the innocent victims who are the real victims like. For  
6    any man that takes up the gun to fight the British or
- 7           I: mhm
- 8           G: so be it a man who takes up a gun to kill a Catholic or  
9    something,
- 10          I: Yea
- 11          G: they’re not so much an innocent victim, there’s a thing- There’s

12 innocent victims and there's victims who choose to do what they choose to

13 do.

14 I: Right

15 G: And all our people were just choosing to look after the next

16 person, go and check someone's all right and all that. So there's innocent

17 victims and there's not so innocent ones. But they're possibly still victims if

18 you know what I mean – of the conflict

19 I: Yea, and the innocent victims have the

20 G: Well they should be a hierarchy, if there is, there shouldn't be a

21 hierarchy, but if there should be one, the innocent should be there.

22 I: Yea

23 G: That's that one that should be getting sorted out

24 I: Yea yea

25 G: And that's why forty, and if it takes another forty years,

26 hopefully I'll still be here

In this extract he clarifies that there are victims of “all sides of” the conflict (line 2). This is a kind of disclaimer because he then issues a “but” (line 4) where he goes on to explain that it is “the innocent victims who are the real victims like” (line 5). Thus a distinction is made between “real” victims and some other kind of victims who are not as real. However, unlike the Unionist groups, there seems to be an unspoken norm which ensures that he cannot dismiss the victimhood of others. He can only create different types of victims. So in lines 11-13 he explains that there are “innocent victims” and victims who “choose” to engage in violence. These latter

type are “possibly still victims” (line 17) but only “of the conflict” (line 18). Thus there are “innocent victims” and “victims of the conflict”.

Again in lines 20-21 we have a disclaimer where he disavows the use of an hierarchy of victims, but if there should be one, the innocent should be at the top. This is an unusual kind of argument because it relies on a hypothetical future which does not exist nor does he suggest that it should exist. Rather, he says that if it should exist. The use of such conditional expressions safeguards him from making a hierarchy of victims but still enables him to hypothetically construct one. The reason why he argues this is because, as he says in line 23, innocent victims are the ones who “should be getting sorted out”.

This extract points out that even when the terminology of “victim” is used inclusively, it does not eliminate difference or the potential for difference to be used as a way of dividing victims into different levels or different types. One group of victims can still be singled out as needing attention more than other victims – in this case, the innocent victims. In both of these examples from the Ballymurphy group we have argued that rhetorical variability is evidenced in both the denial and hypothetical affirmation of a hierarchy of victims. The context in each situation leads the group to argue differently.

### **Rhetorical needs in an ex-prisoners group**

So where does this approach fit with needs-based approaches to victimhood (Shnabel, Nadler, Ullrich, Dovidio, & Carmi, 2009; SimanTov-Nachlieli, Shnabel, & Nadler, 2013) and the idea that competitive victimhood is motivated by the desire to fulfil the need for agency or moral acceptance? We suggest that issues such as agency and moral acceptance can be reconceptualised as rhetorical goals. In other words, if you are having a conversation with a victim and start to call into question their group’s agency, you may find them working hard to

show that actually their group is powerful. Or you may call into question their morality and they might work hard to show that they are in fact a very moral group. Of course, agency and moral acceptance may not be exhaustively fulfilled by their conversational attainment (there may still be demands for more concrete rhetorical expressions of moral acceptance such as having group members installed in a government position) but we argue that they are nevertheless fulfilled to some degree.

When talking with the ex-prisoner's group the interviewer began talking about how some people doubted their morality. Consequently, they said this:

Extract 7

1           B: we're no less people than anyone else from any other section of  
2           of our community, and as such deserve to be recognised as such.

3           I: yea

4           B: uh I think one of the big things for all of us is that the you know  
5           the equality agenda which runs through everything that we're all about –  
6           it's something that's still resisted. You still have that, that old guard

7           I: yea

8           B: of uh you know society here. Certainly within the civil service  
9           and institutions such as that that would see A and myself and the thirty-five  
10          or forty thousand prisoners as very much someone who are lesser people.  
11          Well certainly not.

12          I: yea

13          B: We're not accepting that. So that's what organisations like our

14 own are about. A summed it up really well. I don't need to

15 I: yea

16 B: really go over everything again. We, we are active in our

17 communities, we live in our communities, we play an active part, we're

18 peacebuilders as A rightly described it. When when other people are runnin

19 away from it it's people like A and many others who are at the interfaces

20 I: Yea

21 B: of those communities and you know are working hard, you know

22 privately, often quietly, tirelessly behind the scenes. So I mean you can't

23 have it both ways.

In lines 1-2, the logos is stated that they (the ex-prisoners) are no different from anyone else in "our community" (the Catholic community). As Billig (1987) has pointed out, logoi imply an anti-logoi. Thus the statement they are reacting against is an identity threat which would say, "You are different from other people in the Catholic community." This seems to treat them as perpetrators and thus threatens their positive moral identity.

In 8-10, the interviewee identifies some who might be using this argument. There are some within "the civil services and institutions such as that" who see the ex-prisoners as "lesser people."

In the face of this threat, B needs to build the positive moral identity of the ex-prisoner community. He does this in 16-23 where he gives a list of positive activities that the group is involved in. This is no "three-part list" (Potter, 1996, p. 196) but the list feature still serves to emphasise "the generality of something". Thus the general impression of this group should be

that they are “peacebuilders”. They work “tirelessly behind the scenes”. Thus they cannot be both treated as perpetrators and as peacebuilders (22-23).

In this example, the threat to the group’s positive moral identity has led to a response where the group seek to build their positive moral identity before the interviewer. The need for positive identity was a rhetorical need.

When the victim identity is made salient and the power of the victim is threatened, groups may tend to respond by arguing for their power and need to be heard. On the other hand, when a group’s positive moral identity is threatened, they tend to respond by arguing for their morality and usefulness. Thus in the face of a threat to their rhetorical goal of being seen as a moral group, this group argued that they were peacebuilders and were actively involved in helping their communities. Not only do they feel the need for moral acceptance, but they achieve it through what they say. But we differ slightly from the needs-based perspective insofar as victims may not necessarily want to represent themselves as having agency because having diminished agency may be the ideal strategy for maintaining a sense of superiority over the perpetrator. Thus the speaker is very much in control of what they seek in interaction with others.

### **Discussion**

In this paper we have pointed out that existing research on victimhood could pay more attention to the rhetorical functions of victimhood as seen in discursive interactions. While the rhetorical nature of victimhood is acknowledged, it is underexplored at the micro-level of analysis. We argue that it is important to see it in these terms because this is where victimhood is often expressed. In our analysis, we showed that variability in the expression of forms of victimhood (both inclusive and competitive) can be linked to the achievement of rhetorical goals in conversations.

Competitive or exclusive forms of victimhood were frequently expressed in the Unionist group but when concerns were raised over whether the group might be seen as sectarian, arguments were quickly adduced to show that (innocent) Catholic and Protestant victims are the same. Some form of impression management seems to be at work in such a change in rhetoric whereby the group wants to appear positively to others and both competitive and inclusive strategies could be used to achieve this. Impression management is a regular feature of everyday discourse but its presence here points to the way in which different framings of victimhood can provide a positive image and thus fulfil a need/goal associated with victimhood.

In the Nationalist group slightly different concerns were at stake. In the face of reported Unionist threats to their own victimhood, the group strongly asserted that there could not be an “hierarchy of victims”. In other words, this was a strongly inclusive strategy that asserted their own victimhood as equally valuable to other victims. While some research shows the value of inclusive victimhood in elevating the concerns of other victims (Vollhardt, 2009), this shows that inclusive forms of victimhood can also be used to elevate the concerns of the ingroup to the same level of another group that is recognised as having legitimacy – a pattern seen also by Cohrs et al. (2015). However, in the same group, a kind of exclusive form of victimhood does emerge. Innocent victims are the “real” victims and they should be receiving attention. While this is a different strategy to the inclusive strategy, it shares a common goal – to draw attention to the ingroup. And yet, it is not completely exclusive insofar as drawing attention to one’s own group need not involve the denial of the other group’s victimhood; victimhood need not be a zero-sum game. Victims who are seeking recognition may be less inclusive at times than those who have recognition or who are not seeking recognition, but this may not link to negative intentions



towards other victim groups. There is thus a complexity to victimhood that reveals multiple functions not easily reducible to inclusive/exclusive or competitive/common dichotomies.

We also argued that issues like agency and morality need not merely be seen in terms of psychological drives, but can be conceptualised as rhetorical goals that may be required due to conversational demands. While there are doubtless psychological drives behind moral concerns we are talking here of the discursive use of morality. In the ex-prisoners group, we highlighted how a group commonly categorised as both a victim and perpetrator group, argued for their morality in the face of threats to this. While the duality of perpetrator and victim identities has been recognised in needs-based research (Simantov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014), it has suggested that their empowerment needs are most central and greater antisocial behaviour is exhibited by perpetrator-victims. However, in this case, the group argue that they are engaged in extensive prosocial work as a way of highlighting and building their positive moral identity. Furthermore, we see this as variable at the level of discursive interactions and as opening up new possibilities for exploring the role of other needs in victims' interactions.

In view of this emphasis on the rhetorical variability of victimhood due to conversational demands, there are numerous implications. Firstly, if victimhood is something more intrapersonally variable than has previously been explored, then this has relevance for questionnaire-design relating to victimhood. The variable nature of victim-talk should warn against divorcing victimhood-opinions from the context in which they are expressed. Cohrs et al. (2015) have noted that beliefs about victimhood are expressed strategically and that even "inclusive victimhood" can be used in strategic ways. For example, Catholic victims often identify with Palestinian victims while Protestant victims often identify with Israeli victims. In questionnaire-design researchers should take care to consider the possible rhetorical context in which questions

will be answered. If the participant feels that the questionnaire is being given by an outgroup member they may seek to highlight ingroup suffering and deemphasise outgroup suffering. It may be worth conducting research to see how the perceived identity of the researcher or their institution affects how participants answer a questionnaire relating to victimhood. Asking participants for their group-identification and perceptions of the researcher/institution conducting the research may provide a means of understanding stated victim-beliefs in that questionnaire (e.g. participants may report stronger competitive beliefs if they perceive the institution as identifying with the outgroup).

Furthermore, if needs can be conceptualised in a rhetorical way, there are implications here. While we drew on the two needs (power and moral image) suggested by Shnabel & Nadler (2008) to show how these might be conceptualised rhetorically, others can be suggested. When victims speak they enter into either a real or implied dialogue with those who disagree with them. In this dialogue they may have needs such as being acknowledged as factually correct (Potter & Hepburn, 2008), rational and not driven blindly by emotion (Edwards, 1999) and disinterested by not being driven by personal gain (Edwards & Potter, 2005). These “needs” have been recognised by discursive psychologists who consider goals in people’s discourse but have not used the term “needs”. Other needs may be present in victims’ discourse and it would be interesting to identify these and how they shape victims’ discourses. It would also be interesting to examine the effect of granting or denying these needs. How do victims react when people accuse them of lying or being driven by emotion or having a vested interest? This could be examined by discussing with victims the charges that others bring against them to see how they respond.

In thinking about the different needs that could be identified and the role of impression management in the expression of those needs, it seems that one of the most basic needs is that of a positive image. Granted, a positive image will look different depending on the context; some victims will want to be seen as lacking agency because they want to be seen as innocent victims who need support while others will want to be seen as having agency because they are a force for good in promoting reconciliation. The same applies for the suggested needs of being seen as truthful or rational or disinterested in personal gain. If this is the case, then it may be that the socio-emotional approach to reconciliation (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008) is fundamentally correct in asserting the importance of addressing emotional needs but that underlying the emotional needs is the issue of positive image. This is why one can imagine a group of victims seeking to display low agency but not low morality. Addressing emotional needs then, would be about identifying the societal barriers to the positive image of a group and addressing those in creative ways to ensure that the fundamental need for positive moral image is met. If self-esteem is conceptually related to a positive mental image then addressing this may lead to a reduction in anxiety (as proposed by Terror-management theory; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004) and increased willingness to reconcile. This proposal however, is in need of further research and validation.

It would be remiss to conclude without noting some of the limitations of this work. This research was conducted entirely within the context of Northern Ireland and thus the “needs” that emerge are related to that context. Ex-prisoners’ groups work hard to gain credibility and seek to gain funding for their community-work efforts; victims of state violence have not had their concerns fully addressed and still seek recognition of the innocence of dead relatives; victims on the Unionist side struggle to see some Republican ex-paramilitaries sharing power in Northern

Ireland and often oppose such an arrangement. Research conducted in other contexts may yield further insight because of the different dynamics of past conflict and current processes to deal with the past. Another limitation of this work is that by seeking to explore variability we have neglected to explore stability in representations of victimhood and the reasons for this. While there is variability in constructions of victimhood, there is not infinite variability because collective norms and shared narratives of the past inevitably constrain speakers. Nevertheless, our focus on variability has been an attempt to redress what we perceive as an imbalance in victimhood-research.

Thinking then about victimhood in rhetorical terms opens up whole new avenues for research. And our purpose should not be misunderstood: we are not trying to dismantle previous theories on victimhood and its motivation. Rather, we are trying to show that such research can be both added to and fruitfully reinterpreted in light of its rhetorical nature and rather than seeking to shut down research, this opens up new possibilities for understanding victimhood.

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