


COMMENTARY

## Ethical dilemmas and the victim's perspective: Broadening ethics in industrial-organizational psychology

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As noted by the focal article (Lefkowitz, 2021), the scholarship of professional ethics in the field of industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology has been largely neglected and warrants further investigation. The taxonomy of paradigmatic forms of ethical dilemmas presented in the focal article represents a substantive advancement in our understanding of the potential dilemmas faced by I-O psychologists. With that said, we contend that a more replete understanding of the types of ethical dilemmas faced in I-O psychology can be achieved by considering a diverse set of perspectives. Unfortunately, the focal article does not adequately achieve this end. First, without assessing the experiences of I-O psychologists-in-training (e.g., students), we limit our concept of ethical dilemmas faced by the broader I-O psychology community to those experienced by the most powerful. Indeed, a question of the difference between ethical issues faced by students today versus more senior I-O psychologists is among the comparative questions raised by the focal article, but student affiliates were nevertheless excluded from the sample. Considering that student affiliates make up 43% of SIOP's membership (Poepelman, 2019), inclusion of these individuals would be necessary to adequately understand the dilemmas faced by I-O psychologists broadly.

Second and relatedly, it is argued that the representativeness of the sample is not inherently relevant to the theoretical purpose of the focal article. However, little assessment of demographics related to marginalization, discrimination, and, therefore, potential victimization was conducted. Considering that only 8.9% of respondents in the focal article claimed to be the person targeted or harmed by the ethical dilemma, it seems prudent to consider how a more thorough examination of victimization, the factors that contribute to it, and its influence on ethical perceptions would be of use to I-O psychologists.

Moreover, we must consider what value a taxonomy of ethical dilemmas based on perceptions of the powerful poses in an era when broadening our understanding to include the perspective of the victim seems especially valuable. Would not a consideration of victim perspectives potentially reveal other types of ethical dilemmas that the current taxonomy does not provide? Indeed, incivility is differentiated from ethical dilemmas in the current taxonomy due to the low likelihood that someone would perceive such behaviors as having an ethical or moral quality. The focal article concedes that although one might “very well experience a dilemma whether to be rude or late, most would not consider it a *moral* or *ethical* dilemma” (Lefkowitz, 2021, p. 297). This not only contradicts the research on interpersonal fairness (Bies & Moag, 1986), which suggests that individual perceptions of fairness are influenced by interpersonal concerns, but also

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ignores that determinations of ethical quality in a given situation are greatly influenced by other factors, such as the target of the ethical decision and behaviors (see Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). It is therefore possible that issues of incivility may not be seen as ethical by those who engage in them but may possess an ethical quality to those who are the victims of it. Underscoring this, the focal article asks how the nature of unethical behaviors faced or perpetuated by I-O psychologists compares with those 20 years ago. If anything in recent history has become apparent (e.g., the #MeToo movement), it is that the failure to consider the perspective of the victim fails to give us a full understanding of the ethics of a situation.

Therefore, the present commentary proposes and articulates an argument for the explicit consideration of the victim perspective on the ethical dilemmas faced by I-O psychologists. If I-O psychologists are to understand ethical dilemmas faced by members of our field broadly, then a direct examination of victim experiences needs to be conducted. The focal article seeks to elucidate ethical dilemmas faced by I-O psychologists, and we believe a consideration of the victim's perspective will not only help illuminate and address the ethical dilemmas faced in I-O psychology but also enable those in positions of power to more deeply examine situations they are *unlikely* to perceive as ethical as such. In an age in which society broadly is coming to terms with past injustices, we should orient our considerations of ethical issues to directly address and mitigate the systems of power that ignored if not encouraged sexism, racism, and discrimination—among other ills—in the workplace and academia.

### Precedence for a victim perspective

Research across I-O psychology has designated a central role to understanding both victim and perpetrator perspectives. For example, the victim precipitation hypothesis suggests that the targets of negative workplace experiences “invite” mistreatment through their personal qualities such as their personalities, styles of speech or dress, and actions (Cortina et al., 2018). Although this ideology has been deemed archaic, problematic, and conceptually deficient (see Cortina et al., 2018 for a review), it has been used to explain a variety of organizational phenomena such as abusive supervision (Chan & McAllister, 2014; Henle & Gross, 2014), workplace incivility (Milam et al., 2009), workplace bullying (Samnani, 2013; Samnani & Singh, 2015), workplace exclusion (Scott et al., 2013), and workplace ostracism (Wu et al., 2011). Even though these areas of research have begun to move away from a focus on victims as precipitators of their own negative workplace experiences, critiques of this body of research have the potential to inform empirical work on ethical dilemmas.

More specifically, the perpetrator predation paradigm has been suggested as an alternative theoretical framework that explains these dynamics without resorting to blaming the victim for their mistreatment (Cortina, 2017). Of note, this framework does not assert that target characteristics are irrelevant to the likelihood of negative workplace experiences but rather emphasizes their relevance to the actor in the situation (Cortina et al., 2018). In other words, it is not the victim's deservingness of the abuse, incivility, or injustice that is in focus but rather the actor's engagement in such behaviors in response to characteristics of the victim that is in focus. Somewhat ironically, the shift in focus to the actor or perpetrator reorients the understanding of the victim to just that—the party that is affected by someone else's malevolence as opposed to a party that is responsible for their own misfortune. This theoretical reorientation (i.e., one in which victimhood and its effects on perception is assessed) can similarly inform research on ethical dilemmas. Namely, it can elucidate (a) how status affects perceptions and experience of ethical dilemmas and (b) subsequently, how victim characteristics may factor into perceptions of ethical dilemmas.

Our argument is not to suggest that there is no value in the perspectives among the sample obtained by Lefkowitz (2021) but rather that the representativeness of the sample is in fact relevant

to empirical and conceptual models of ethical dilemmas. Below, we focus on research demonstrating that status and victim characteristics can influence ethical phenomena, thereby calling into question the use of a taxonomy that does not explicitly consider the victim's perspective.

### **Status and its effects on ethical perceptions**

Drawing from scholarly work on dehumanization (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014), we note that people are adept at minimizing the human qualities of others. In doing so, they are able to disengage from the moral implications of their behaviors (Bandura, 1991). As noted by Haslam (2006), the process of dehumanization can “place members of despised outgroups beyond the boundaries of moral consideration” (p. 255). Pertaining to the target of dehumanization, an integrative review by Haslam and Loughnan (2014) suggested that target status leads to greater dehumanization; namely, those of lower status are far more likely to solicit dehumanization from perpetrators.

### **Victim characteristics and their effects on ethical perceptions**

Belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Miller, 1978) articulates the argument that individuals are motivated to perceive the world in such a way that people get what they deserve. Individuals are therefore likely to see victims as deserving of the predicaments they find themselves in—though this can vary based on individual differences in belief in a just world (Furnham, 2003). Within the realm of I-O psychology, researchers have shown that individuals who had experienced organizational injustice in the past were more likely to be the targets of victim derogation by those who were evaluating them as job applicants (Skarlicki & Turner, 2014). Similarly, when measuring individual endorsement of just-world beliefs, De Judicibus and McCabe (2001) found that belief in a just world predicted more blame for targets of sexual harassment. Of course, situational variables can influence the derogation of victims such that when systems are perceived to be under threat, derogation may be more likely (Kay et al., 2005).

### **Expanding our taxonomy: Incivility**

Given that Lefkowitz (2021) defined an ethical dilemma as involving ethical and moral principles, implied that an evaluation of moral or ethical quality is dependent on an individual's perception, and assessed individual perceptions of why the situation was ethical in nature, it must be considered how status and/or victim characteristics would have influenced the reports provided in the focal article. The aforementioned research on dehumanization and just-world theory has suggested that at the very least our own perception of the ethical quality of situations is influenced by factors beyond our conscious control. It therefore behooves researchers to consider how victims or even those without possession of power would perceive situations that may not meet the threshold for ethical consideration in the eyes of others. Indeed, if a situation does not *subjectively* seem to involve an ethical quality, it does not necessarily mean that it *objectively* does not.

Consider the case of incivility, which the focal article distinguishes from an ethical dilemma in that the perpetrator perceives it as a choice between rudeness and respect rather than moral right and wrong (cf. Bies & Moag, 1986). Drawing from Väyrynen and Laari-Salmela (2018) who suggest that when violations are only thought of in terms of the most extreme examples, or even subtle but intentional cases, the more hidden problems within organizations are ignored, we pose the following question: Is it not possible that incivility could constitute an ethical dilemma?

First, research suggests that incivility is likely to target low-status individuals. Cortina's (2008) model of selective incivility suggests that employees from marginalized groups (e.g., racial and ethnic minorities, gender and sexual minorities, older adults) are disproportionately targeted by incivility. Coupled with processes of dehumanization (Haslam, 2006) and just-world beliefs (Lerner, 1980), it is likely that perpetrators would not see the potential moral quality of incivility.

Moreover, extant social structures and pressures limit the extent to which perpetrators would be called into question for their incivility. Second, though the perpetrators of incivility may fail to see the ethical quality of their actions, incivility may place victims in an ethical dilemma. All too often, the onus has been placed on marginalized individuals to speak up or educate others about their experiences. Individuals who are targets of inappropriate comments, for example, are often challenged with the dilemma of whether to speak on the impropriety of those comments (see Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Meares et al., 2004). To speak up for what is “right” risks retaliation (see Cortina & Magley, 2003); to be silent ensures self-preservation and protection. Both of these ends therefore present as ethical goals seemingly at odds when a victim is confronted with incivility. Given the characterization of ethical dilemmas in the focal article, it seems that incivility may present as an ethical dilemma *particularly* to victims—representing effectively what is a hybridization of the role conflict (i.e., deferring to higher power/status persons) and values conflict (i.e., speaking against wrongs) dilemmas already presented in the taxonomy.

Consider, specifically, the example provided in Lefkowitz (2021) for incivility. It describes, in brief, a faculty person making a comment regarding a person’s appearance: “a female committee member who commented on her outfit as ‘very professional, except for the 6’’ inch stiletto hooker high heels’”(Table 3). To the person making the comment, it may not have even presented as a dilemma generally—be it between ethical principles or even principles of respect and civility. Taking into consideration research based on just-world theory (e.g., De Judicibus & McCabe, 2001) as well as dehumanization (Haslam, 2006), it is unlikely the situation would have been deemed worthy of moral consideration by the perpetrator. If anything, the student would have likely been seen as deserving of the comment rather than such a comment necessitating ethical consideration. Indeed, other examples of ethical dilemmas provided in the focal article illustrate this phenomenon of victim blaming. Specifically, the example provided for “role conflict” suggests that a student’s claims of sexual harassment are due to her being “troubled.”

Returning to the illustrative example of incivility, a denial of the ethical quality of the situation denies the premise that sexist comments are morally wrong. In an age when we continue to reckon with those individuals who engaged in sexual harassment (e.g., the #MeToo movement), the failure to consider incivility as constituting an ethical dilemma may only serve to reinforce those systems that allowed sexism, for example, to be permitted. Admittedly, excluding incivility from ethical dilemmas is consistent with the focal article’s qualifications for an ethical dilemma. Broadly speaking, however, the exclusion of incivility from a taxonomy of ethical dilemmas fails to challenge those who would engage in uncivil acts to consider the ethicality of seemingly innocuous or even well-intentioned actions and statements. It also fails to consider how incivility may be perceived as an ethical dilemma by the victim, thereby ignoring a valuable perspective within our field.

## Conclusion

Taken together, it is our position that a deliberate consideration of the victim perspective can ultimately broaden our understanding of the *types* of ethical dilemmas faced in the field of I-O psychology. Without a consideration of the victim perspective, these issues may be rendered invisible even to the most well-intentioned individuals. An explicit consideration of this perspective enables those in positions of power to consider and examine those situations that are *unlikely* to be perceived as containing ethical or moral qualities. It also allows for a direct consideration of how victims may experience situations differently than perpetrators in terms of their ethical qualities. Our understanding of ethical dilemmas must continue to evolve alongside the social, political, and organizational landscapes of our current times. Ultimately, we believe a thorough examination of the victim perspective in ethical dilemmas can help achieve this end.

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