

THE SATURDAY ESSAY

BY SIMON WESSELY

In the culture of counselling, we all risk becoming victims

On Monday someone stole my computer. When I reported this, a charming policeman told me that I was as likely to see it again as I was to become a supermodel, and there was nothing much they could do to recover the stolen goods. This came as no surprise, and I assumed the matter had ended, but the following day came some evidence of police action — an invitation to join a victim support group.

I didn't go, but if I had, what would have happened? I would have shared my experience with others, who had presumably endured any of the entire range of criminal activities. We would have sympathised with each other, emphasised on our respective losses, and gradually I would have shifted from being someone whose computer had been stolen to my new role, that of a victim.

A victim is simply someone to whom something happens, presumably something untoward (although many Los Angeles psychotherapists make a tidy living assisting the "victims of success", those whom fame and fortune has presumably disadvantaged in their struggle for existence). It implies no particular vice or virtue. Yet in recent years the status of victimhood has become something to strive for. Almost anyone can now lay claim to the victim state, since which of us has never had to endure some form of adversity or acute trauma in our lives? Arguably the most powerful, and certainly the richest, woman in America, Oprah Winfrey, can also describe herself as a victim without any apparent irony.

The modern cult of the victim has an admirable side. There have been times when victims were seen not as gravenworthy but embarrassing, and even complicit in their own victimhood. The most insidious example of this was the post-war treatment of Holocaust survivors (and for once that equally abused term "survivor" seems to be apt), who were accused of having

participated, or at least acquiesced, in their own destruction.

The modern focus on the victim has reduced the stigma of misfortune. But that same passiveness, which reduces the risk of being seen as complicit in one's own misfortune, carries with it other, less desirable characteristics. More than the event itself, the victim role seeks to shape our identity. As Robert Hughes expressed it in *Culture of Complaint*, a victim is someone who is judged not on what they are, or on what they do, but on what was done to them.

Jan Buruma, writing in a recent issue of the *New York Review of Books*, recounted the story of a Chinese-American lady whose reaction to the recent publicity given to the hideous Nanking massacres of 1937 was to say that "it makes me feel proud to be a Chinese-American". A peculiar form of pride, he noted. Indeed so, but she was correct; for many whose lives are otherwise uneventful and free of real threat or horror, there is nothing much else on which to base a cultural identity.

Perhaps the most ironic aspect to the current Balkan tragedy is that every party to the conflict in former Yugoslavia sees itself as a victim. Even the Serbs, those current international pariahs and creators of new generations of victims, regard themselves very much as victims, and their national identity is closely bound up in the folk memories of oppression by Turks, Austrians, Germans and Communists. One can be oppressor and oppressed at the same time, but our John Wayne need to see every conflict in terms of good and bad guys cannot cope with such complexity.

True victimhood is accompanied by feelings of pain and powerlessness, and for the rest of us to make some attempt to empathise with that condition must be both humanitarian and desirable. However, it is all too easy to extrapolate from empathy to seeing ourselves as victims, to embrace the modern non *sequitur* in

which those who feel themselves at a disadvantage claim common kinship with others similarly victimised. Hence, because I "was bullied at school" or "am a homosexual" I can claim special kinship with generations of victims, past and present. Although it is true that all of these groups, and many others, have suffered, they have not suffered in the same way, and to pretend otherwise is not only historically inaccurate, but ultimately robs each experience of its uniqueness. Nowadays being a victim may deflect responsibility, and offers an easy solution to many awkward problems. The

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celebrity can gain sympathy by their chat-show-induced tearful recollections of trauma. And as Sondheim's delinquents serenading Officer Krupke knew, it is the norm for those charged with antisocial acts to point to their own victimhood by way of explanation. Of course, this may be true; like any psychiatrist I know that those who commit the worst crimes inevitably come from the worst backgrounds, and have experienced the worst abuses. But we must not confuse explanation with responsibility. Being a victim plays a part in the genesis of abnormal behaviour; but neither excuses nor exculpates it, and conveys no moral superiority or further insights into the human condition.

Claiming the victim's role deflects criticism and avoids responsibility. In particular the public persona who lays claim to victim status becomes above criticism. Not only Oprah Winfrey, but Eva Perón and, of course, Diana, Princess of Wales during their lives, managed to have their cases and eat them — wealth, power, influence but

also victimhood.

And if I am victim, then I need treatment. The arrival of the teams of "trained counsellors" is as much a part of the theatre of any modern disaster as the emergency services themselves. "Debriefing" is now urged on everyone involved, and as quickly as possible. No matter that the people being treated may have nothing at all in common other than they got on a train at the same time. No matter that not everyone wants to talk, or even needs to talk, about their traumatic experience. No matter that the evidence from nine randomised, controlled trials shows clearly the lack of benefit of debriefing, and raises the possibility that it may even do more harm than good.

Indeed, its potential for harm may come precisely from the way that professionalising distress helps transform people from being participants in an event, to victims of trauma, and eventually to patients needing treatment. If I am a victim, something must be done for me.

Our responses to trauma, bereavement, our sexuality, losing our job, all become psychological processes that need to be carried out under supervision, because ordinary people are now considered too incompetent to deal with anything other than the mundane and familiar, and require professional help to guide them through life's vicissitudes.

After treatment, the rituals of victimhood demand one further recognition that of compensation. If some wrong was done to me, someone must pay. "It's not for the money," they say on the court steps, and they are right. Compensation is not about financial gain, but is the final badge of victimhood, the symbol of the wrong done to me. I found myself saddened when the parents of Stephen Lawrence recently announced that they would be seeking compensation from the police. Their dignity and determination over six years had won universal admiration, while the prejudice and incompetence they had suffered could

hardly have been better established. But I suspect they felt that, unless and until they received compensation, the final proof of their victimhood would be denied them.

Eventually we will all be victims. As I write I see that another NHS laboratory has admitted to misreporting some cervical smears, and thus created another set of "victims of screening errors". Last year 4,428,938 cervical smears were examined in England and Wales. Add to that 1,179,558 breast screenings, and you have nearly 6 million such tests examined annually. If only 0.1 per cent of tests were misinterpreted (an impossible standard), that still implies that every year another 6,000 "victims of screening" are created. We now believe that there is no such thing as an accident, that for any untoward event someone must be responsible, someone must pay, and someone else must stop it "ever happening again", as Frank Dobson intones every time the human beings who carry out the screening programmes prove themselves to be just that — human.

We now also believe that adversity must always be damaging, that those to whom bad things happen must inevitably be scarred by the events. In so doing we prevent other discourses — as part of our research into the effects of the Gulf war on the health of servicemen and women, we are finding that many soldiers, far from being scarred by the experience of war, in fact enjoyed it. Not everyone exposed to adversity becomes a victim — some people benefit from, and even enjoy, the experience.

If we wish to avoid becoming a nation of victims, outdoing each other in the battle to prove who has suffered most, it is time to acknowledge that adversity is part of human experience; and while it may alter us for good or ill, we should resist the temptation to redefine our identities solely in terms of what has been done to us.

The author is professor of psychological medicine at King's College