Victimhood in Swedish political discourse

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Abstract
In contemporary politics, the category of victimhood confers rights and recognition. An inclusive discussion about the construction and conferral of victimhood, which includes individuals from different social backgrounds, need be informed by the possible uses of victimhood in political discourse. The present study investigates how individuals and groups are positioned as victims by mainstream Swedish politicians. A constructionist discourse analysis inspired by positioning theory was performed of eight longer political speeches and fifty-six addresses to the Swedish parliament, held over the course of a year. The results suggest that individuals in the ‘normal’ majority, comprising the most numerous and normatively dominant group of society, were positioned as victims. Heterodox minorities, which had fundamentally different morals and political ambitions compared to the ‘normal’ majority, were positioned as offenders. The study argues that a more inclusive construction of victimhood could be accomplished by engaging with heterodox minorities through dialogue.

Keywords
Constructionism, discourse analysis, majority, minority, normal, normality, parliamentary debates, politics, positioning theory, poststructuralism, social liberalism, speeches, Sweden, victim, victimhood

Introduction
In liberal democracies, politics are fundamentally moral as they relate to issues of justice and equality (Rawls, 2005). Morals shape the actions and social perceptions of individuals and groups (Nussbaum, 2010), and from a conflict perspective, morals are
norms and ideals put forward by a group to guide and control individual behavior (Gert and Gert, 2020). Since morals can control behavior, they can serve as instruments of political power and dominance (Horwitz, 2018; Jeffery and Candea, 2006). Morals can be contested and changed, through alternative story lines and positionings made by groups and individuals (Davies and Harré, 1990). Knowledge about the discursive construction of morals can allow for more inclusive politics, in which individuals with diverse experiences and viewpoints are included in reasonable dialogues and debates (Mill, 2015; Rawls, 2005). The present study explores the discursive construction of victimhood and the positioning of victims by mainstream Swedish politicians.

The politics of victimhood

Individuals engage in the politics of victimhood when they demand sympathy and recognition for being victims (Horwitz, 2018; Taylor, 1997). I suggest that the Janus face of the politics of victimhood is the politics of disgust, through which individuals and groups are blamed and repressed for offending the moral emotions of the majority (Nussbaum, 2010). Both the politics of victimhood and the politics of disgust are exclusive and relative: the categories of victim and offender relate only to particular individuals and groups, who are afforded sympathy or guilt in comparison to outsiders. The politics of victimhood and the politics of disgust legitimate the power of the majority over individuals and minorities by appealing to moral emotions rather than reason, dialogue, and understanding (Mill, 2015; Nussbaum, 2010).

The concept of normality reflects the characteristics of the majority and suggests that the majority is the standard against which individuals and minorities should be compared to determine their symbolic value (Davis, 2013). While the older concept of the ideal refers to who is good and beautiful, the concept of normality relates to who is included in the majority (Davis, 2013). In the present study, the concept of the ‘normal’ majority refers to the most numerous and dominant group in society, comprising several subgroups that conform to the same fundamental morals and political ambitions. Heterodox minorities include any groups that hold fundamentally different morals and political ambitions, compared to the ‘normal’ majority population.

From a critical perspective on discourse and power, there is a perpetual struggle between different groups over the definition and conferral of the category of victimhood (Horwitz, 2018; Jeffery and Candea, 2006). It has been argued that the category of victimhood is passivizing and belittling, restricting the range of acceptable agency and resistance of those being labeled as such (Dijk, 2009). Individuals that are given negative recognition tend to accept a negative self-image that limits their opportunities for acting and thinking (Davies and Harré, 1990; Taylor, 1997). Still, it has been noticed that the category of victimhood affords rights for compensation, which motivates individuals to claim victimhood (Horwitz, 2018). Victimhood can be regarded as a form of positive recognition – a provision of rights – that is sought by social groups (Horwitz, 2018; Taylor, 1997). Victimhood and offence are commonly constructed as mutually exclusive categories, and victimhood does thereby protect against guilt and responsibility (Jeffery and Candea, 2006; Noor et al., 2012). When
individuals are accused of subjecting someone else to a state of victimhood, they commonly respond by claiming the victimhood category for themselves, as if they cannot be victims and offenders at the same time (Jeffery and Candea, 2006; Sullivan et al., 2012).

The Swedish context

Discursively constructed victimhoods cannot be understood apart from the social and cultural contexts in which they are situated and in relation to which they are made meaningful (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). The present study is based on speeches and addresses made by politicians in Sweden, and, arguably, Sweden is fertile ground for research on victimhood. To begin with, the extensive welfare system has promoted a culture of state individualism, in which citizens are less dependent on the family and more heavily dependent on the decisions made by state bureaucrats (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2015). Reliance on an impersonal party (the state bureaucrats) is likely to promote the usage of victimhood in political struggles, where displays of victimhood imply rights for compensation (Campbell and Manning, 2018; Horwitz, 2018). Also, Sweden is one of the most culturally progressive countries in the world, where traditional identifications such as genders, sexualities, and religious convictions are most clearly questioned (World Values Survey, 2020). Because traditional values and social structures are relatively weak in Swedish society, researchers are likely to find prevalent struggles over the formulation and recognition of morals and victimhoods (Campbell and Manning, 2018; Taylor, 1997).

Despite a strong contemporary tolerance for individual differences in personal life, Swedish democracy has been shaped by communitarian politics (Dahlstedt and Hertzberg, 2007; Edling, 2013), and individual citizens had few rights in relation to government institutions during much of the 20th century (Blanc-Noel, 2013; Zaremba, 1999). Ethnic minorities have had few opportunities to influence the fundamental aspects of the democratic system (Dahlstedt and Hertzberg, 2007). Swedish political culture is largely oriented toward the ideals of egalitarianism and consensus, and minorities may experience a pressure to conform with the values and practices favored by the majority (Bäck, 2003; Blanc-Noel, 2013; Dahlstedt and Hertzberg, 2007; Larsson et al., 2012). The victimhood and minority categories have historically been precarious in Sweden, as they have implied risks of disciplinary measures such as forced sterilizations and institutionalizations (Foucault, 1980; Zaremba, 1999).

Aim

The present study questions the normative rule of the majority that still appears to be present in Swedish political and social life (Bäck, 2003; Larsson et al., 2012). To allow for an inclusive and critical discussion about the construction of victimhood in contemporary politics, knowledge is needed about the positioning of victims in mainstream political discourse. The present study aims to explore how Swedish politicians position individuals and groups as victims through discourse.
Method

Data

The empirical material of the study comprised political speeches and addresses made by the leaders, or the occasional stand-in leaders, of all eight political parties with seats in the Swedish parliament. Fifty-six initiating political addresses held in six parliamentary debates were analyzed. During the parliamentary debates between party leaders, all leaders have the opportunity to make one longer initial address each. All parliamentary debates between the party leaders over the course of a year were included in the data set, from the dates January 30th 2019, May 8th 2019, June 12th 2019, October 16th 2019, November 13th 2019, and January 15th 2020. The debates were conducted before the Covid-19 crisis, when migration and criminality often were the most important political concerns to the Swedish public (Novus, 2019). The debates were broadcasted in public radio and television during normal working hours. The highlights of the debates were brought to the Swedish public through the news reporting. The official transcripts of the debates were received from https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/?doktyp=prot.

Furthermore, eight political speeches held by the eight party leaders during the ‘democracy week’ at Almedalen were analyzed. The ‘democracy week’ at Almedalen is an annual event in which politicians, companies, NGOs, and the public meet and debate politics and policies. Each political party with seats in the parliament had one day dedicated as their own, on which the leader of the party made a longer speech that was broadcasted on national television. The highlights from these speeches, too, were brought to the public through news reporting. The official transcripts of the speeches were received from https://almedalsveckan.info/tal.

Analytical departure

The present study performed a discourse analysis from a constructionist perspective. The study was oriented toward the approaches of poststructuralism (Foucault, 1980; Gavey, 1989) and discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). From a constructionist perspective, discourse does not objectively reflect truth but shapes experiences of reality according to intention, power, and social position (Foucault, 1980; Nietzsche, 1997; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Arguably, discourse can be analyzed in relation to its functions and implications rather than its mere semantic contents (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Both speakers and listeners are actively contributing to the discursive construction of reality based on their positions and convictions, which underlines the importance of understanding the both the authors and audiences of political discourse (Culler, 1982; Davies, 1991).

From a constructionist viewpoint, the identification of victims and offenders can be made through an analysis of the positioning of individuals in political discourse (Davies and Harré, 1990; Harré, 2015; Harré et al., 2009). Individuals are positioned by their roles and actions in story lines, such as acts of bravery in the story line of a heroic leader of a radical political party (Davies and Harré, 1990; Harré, 2015; Harré et al., 2009). Positioning theory advocates narratology as an analytical tool for story lines (Harré,
2015), but the narratological approach seeks to uncover the ‘deep structures’ of meaning in story lines, and this approach is at odds with the poststructural understanding of meaning as immanent in the actual text without any fixed external reference (Culler, 1982; Gavey, 1989). Instead of using a narratological approach to uncover the ‘deep structures’ of story lines, the present study sought to identify a plurality of meanings through analyses of a plurality of speakers and audiences in story lines and a clear positioning of the researcher (see the next section) (Blumenreich, 2004; Culler, 1982). Positionings confer individuals and groups with specific rights and duties (Harré, 2015; Harré et al., 2009). Individuals that are positioned as victims receive rights to ‘compensation’, while offenders and privileged individuals are afforded a duty to compensate victims (Horwitz, 2018; Jeffery and Candea, 2006). Also, individuals can be positioned with the right to position themselves and others – this conferral of the right to perform positionings is referred to as a second-order positioning (Harré et al., 2009).

The analysis was initiated when first reading and becoming acquainted with the political speeches and addresses. I read and reread the speeches and addresses closely to become familiar with the data, and I made temporary notes about possible patterns of interest. In particular, patterns of consistency and contradiction were given attention and elaborated upon (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Findings that were contrary to the main conclusions of the study were identified and given attention as patterns of contradiction.

Political and ethical orientation

The findings and conclusions of the present study were formulated against a backdrop of social-liberal political values and ethics. From the social-liberal perspective, democracy should aim to defend each individual’s freedom to pursue his or her aims independently from others, in general, and from the political majority and the state, in particular (Mill, 2015). However, individual freedom and liberal democracy cannot be sustained without a certain amount of equality and reasonable dialogue in society (Rawls, 2005). Based on the ethics and political values of social liberalism, the present study sought to make the political construction and conferral of victimhood more inclusive. The ethical and political purpose of the article was to offer individuals and heterodox minorities an opportunity to understand the discursive construction of victimhood, thereby improving their chances of participating in the formulation of political discourse.

Result and analysis

The opposition between victims and offenders

The ‘normal’ majority and the heterodox minorities could be clearly noticed in the analyzed discourse. In some instances, the expression ‘ordinary people’ was used to highlight both the frequency and normativity of the victims in the ‘normal’ majority. The term ordinary connoted a natural state of being, which could be taken for a matter of course, and against which differences and peculiarities could be compared. The heterodox minorities, with fundamentally different morals and political ambitions, were identified as socially
disconnected and disloyal toward the ‘normal’ majority. For example, the following discourse was expressed by the leader of the social-conservative Swedish Democrats:

‘The disconnected mishmash politics pursued by the government has meant that totally ordinary, honest people, who year after year faithfully have paid taxes and contributed to the common budget, now have to see how the welfare no longer manages to fulfill its aims. I have to ask myself, honorable president [of the Swedish Parliament], if it was worth it. Was it worth the price that the elderly and sick have had to pay today?’ (Jimmie Åkesson, October 16th, 2019)

Through this proclamation, the ‘normal’ majority was positioned as both victims and deserving contributors to the common welfare, while the small group of politicians in the government were denounced as incompetent and treacherous members of a heterodox minority. The terms ‘honest’ and ‘faithfully’ in connection with the term ‘ordinary’ suggested that the ‘normal’ majority was morally righteous and deserving compensation for their loyalty and suffering. A complementary discursive pattern, beside the reference to ‘ordinary people’, was the claim of representing and defending democracy against heterodox minorities such as political extremists. The leader of the liberal Center Party stated that:

‘Sweden will never compromise regarding the equal value of all human beings, democracy, and the rule of law. . . If a member country of the European Union does not manage to fulfill these things that are to be taken for granted – if one circumscribes people’s mobility and freedom, politicizes courts, silences individual journalists, and restricts the freedom of press – then it must have consequences. We can no longer just watch a harsh right-wing populism seeking to repress their own citizens and in the long term threaten the entire European collaboration.’ (Annie Lööf, November 13th, 2019)

This piece of discourse suggested that the ‘normal’ majority of Swedish citizens defended democratic freedoms against infringements made by right-wing politicians. The usage of the concept of ‘democracy’ implied that the ‘normal’ majority of the people (demos) could rule and claim political power (kratos) in a legitimate manner (Harper, 2020). ‘Sweden’ was used as a metonym – a logically related symbol – referring to the ‘normal’ majority of Swedish citizens. The latter conclusion became clear from the substitution of the first-person pronoun ‘we’ for ‘Sweden’ in the third cited sentence. Beside political opponents, heterodox economic and cultural minorities were commonly positioned as offenders. The Prime Minister of Sweden and the leader of the Social Democratic Party posed the following polemical questions:

‘Will an assistant nurse in the class society of the 2020s feel anxiety for the upcoming pension and read newspaper headlines about executive elites earning 358,000 SEK a day, rapidly flying by? Will a plumber on the countryside see how resources are missing for keeping health clinics and maternity wards open, while he/she is paying interests on mortgages to four big banks that make an annual profit of 112 billion SEK? Will a talented but poor girl see on Instagram how her friends enter Oxford or Sorbonne and simultaneously know that her local high school will be closed if its profits decline?’ (Stefan Löfven, June 12th, 2019)
The cited sentences offered a plurality of brief story lines that dramatized the same opposition between deserving poor victims and underserving wealthy elites. The actions that the victims in the ‘normal’ majority performed in the brief story lines underlined that they deserved compensation: they worked, paid interests, and were concerned about their education. The victims in the ‘normal’ majority deserved compensation because the offenders in the economic elite had taken more than was morally defensible – if there had not been any reference group of offenders in the economic elite, the challenges of the victims in the ‘normal’ majority could have been considered quite reasonable, or a matter of course. The offenders in the economic elite, on the other hand, were positioned with duties to support the ‘normal’ majority, because their resources were contrasted with the needs of the victims in the ‘normal’ majority.

Victims and offenders were generally identified as mutually exclusive categories: victims were not at the same time guilty of an offense, and offenders did not have any victimhoods for which they deserved compensation. In a few instances, this mutually exclusive opposition was questioned, however. One of the two leaders of the Environmental Party expressed himself in the following manner:

‘It used to be clear who was the villain and who was the hero. And we could be on the right side. Brave game wardens with riffles and Land Rovers against the evil poachers. But how should we humans handle the fact that we are the villains? That it is our way of life that is the cause of things being this way? . . . For us, green is not just a color, it is an attitude. An understanding of the fact that the human position on Earth is dependent on our protecting other species too, with whom we share this planet. The green movement knows that what we do to the planet, we also do to ourselves.’ (Per Bolund, June 30th, 2019)

In this quote, the terms ‘villain’, ‘hero’, ‘brave game wardens’, and ‘evil poachers’ contribute to a dramatic story line. Presumably, the story line involving game wardens and poachers appeals to, and can be readily understood, by an audience that is already sympathetic toward the ideology of the Environmental Party. The story line exemplifies the ‘breakdown’ of a story line that positions the partisans of the Environmental Party as protectors of wildlife and endangered species, followed by the emergence of a new story line that offers a grander positioning of these partisans as protectors of all species on the planet, including humanity. The actions expressed in the story line reveal that the partisans of the Environmental Party do not consider themselves as victims but as powerful defenders and prudent patrons of victims: their actions include being ‘brave’, ‘understanding’, ‘protecting’, ‘knowing’, and taking care of oneself and others.

The leader of the Environmental Party seems to question the opposition between victims as offenders, since he argues that humans in general are both the offenders and victims of environmental destruction. However, from the perspective of discursive psychology, the semantic content of the proclamation made by the leader of the Environmental Party is less important than the function that the discourse performs (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Unlike most other extracts of discourse related to victims and offenders, this discourse appears not to be intended to distribute rights and duties. Rather it admonishes the audience to take responsibility and action; it is an exhortation for people to mobilize and change their behavior. Thus, the discourse agrees with the conclusion that the ‘normal’
majority were not commonly blamed as offenders in the analyzed political speeches and addresses.

Another aspect of the discourse that, at first, appeared to contradict the main argument of the article was that not only the ‘normal’ majority, but minorities too, were described as victims in much discourse. The minorities afforded with the category of victimhood, however, were ‘normal’ in the sense that they did not fundamentally deviate from the morals and political ambitions of the ‘normal’ majority. The minority victims were, therefore, subgroups within the majorities rather than separate from them. Examples of such subgroups generally included by the ‘normal’ majority were the LGBTQ community, the elderly, and the unemployed. These minorities were not claimed to suffer from oppression by the majority as such – there was generally a heterodox minority of offenders responsible for the oppression. Minorities with heterodox morals and political ambitions were openly denounced. The leader of the conservative Moderate Party stated that:

‘Sweden is actually very Swedish. A tolerant country where one often is allowed to do what one wants. But Sweden is not tolerant toward intolerance. If one cannot or does not want to follow the laws, rules, and values that have built our country, well, then one has to settle somewhere else. And we must understand that successful integration is not at all a “mutual process” – but a rather one-sided one.’ (Ulf Kristersson, July 1st, 2019)

In this statement, the metonym ‘Sweden’ referred to the ‘normal’ majority of the Swedish population. The category ‘Swedish’ was used to identify belonging to the ‘normal’ majority of the Swedish population, but it was not provided with any clear definition. The ‘normal’ majority of Sweden was explicitly claimed to be tolerant, after which followed a number of deviations which it could not tolerate. Apparently, the ‘normal’ majority of Sweden could tolerate some differences of opinion (although these were not made specific), but deviations that signaled adherence to fundamentally different morals and political ambitions were clearly not tolerated. The initial claim to be tolerant appeared to be used preemptively to ameliorate some of the following examples of what could not be tolerated. In his speech, the leader of the conservative Moderate Party continued to discuss the problems with honor culture and oppression of immigrant women by immigrant men. It is noteworthy that immigrant women were not positioned as oppressed by the ‘normal’ majority of Swedish citizens but only as victims of the heterodox minority of immigrant men, who presumably had morals and political ambitions that contrasted with Swedish gender equality (World Values Survey, 2020).

**Positioning of the political self**

The politicians typically performed a second-order positioning of themselves and, implicitly, claimed that they were members of the ‘normal’ majority. Normality, in this regard, was expressed through mundane and inauspicious experiences in everyday life and proclaimed interest in popular culture and sport. The second-order positioning of the self was typically made early in the speeches, whereby the following political discourse and positionings were legitimated. For example, the leader of the conservative Christian Democratic party introduced her speech by stating that:
‘I always look forward to speaking in Almedalen. But this year I was a bit worried. The national team was fighting for the bronze medal. If it’s a draw and extra time is added, will anyone show up and listen to me? Will even I show up and have the speech? I talked to my husband earlier today. He said that he and the children will be looking at home at least. . .as long as there won’t be penalty kicks.’ (Ebba Busch Thor, July 6th, 2019)

This personal story line about the party leader and her family includes mundane actions and concerns that the party leader ostensibly shares with the ‘normal’ majority. By joking about herself and her family, and by suggesting that trivial matters such as sport held an intense attraction to her, the leader of the conservative Christian Democratic Party positioned herself as both ‘ordinary’ and humble. The closeness achieved may be understood in relation to the norm of egalitarianism favored by Swedish culture (World Values Survey, 2020). By positioning herself on the same level of status and power as the audience, the leader of the Christian Democratic Party suggested that she shared the experiences of the ‘normal’ majority.

The party leaders not only stressed their ‘ordinariness’ and humbleness, but they also positioned themselves as having experienced personal defeats, thereby claiming the legitimacy of victimhood. The newly elected leader of the Liberal Party was critical of being positioned in relation to the structural disadvantages of her female gender and Afro-Swedish ethnic heritage, yet she underlined the victimhoods she had experienced:

‘Because this is the first time I speak at Almedalen as a party leader, I thought I would better be a bit personal and relate my speech to some personal experiences I have had in my life. I have my roots in a country with a dark history. From colonialism to war and dictatorship. A terrible amount of suffering. But I am raised to never give up the struggle for democracy and every person’s right to make their voice heard.’ (Nyamko Sabuni, July 3rd, 2019)

The leader of the Liberal Party thus declared that she had been the victim of political oppression but had fought for democratic improvements. The cited discourse connects the party leader’s personal story line with the story lines of democratization and human progress. By suggesting that she had personal acquaintance with ‘dark’ historical movements such as ‘colonialism’, ‘war’, and ‘dictatorship’, she positioned herself as having an understanding for victims of political oppression. Presumably, by positioning herself with this identification and knowledge, the party leader appeared more credible and genuine in her proclaimed struggle for democracy. In a similar manner, the leader of the conservative Moderate Party made the following statement:

‘I was raised in the conviction that perseverance and hard work give results, regardless of whether one considers school, the gymnastic hall, or work. Millions of Swedes are formed by exactly the same ideals: that problems are made to be solved. If what one has tried thus far has not worked, one has to try something better and learn from the one’s mistakes, from one’s own and those of others. That should be true for politics too.’ (Ulf Kristersson, January 15th, 2020)

Through this piece of discourse, the leader of the conservative Moderate Party characterized himself as a trustworthy, reasonable person, who shared the upbringing and moral convictions of the Swedish majority population. Just like the leader of the Liberal
Party in the previous quote, the leader of the Moderate Party claimed that he ‘was raised’ to being reasonable and ‘normal’. By referring to upbringings that consolidated their moral and political values of democracy and reason, the political leaders positioned themselves as firmly immersed in the morals and political ambitions of the ‘normal’ majority.

Positioning of the political audience

In all of the analyzed speeches and political addresses, the intended audience appeared to comprise the ‘normal’ majority of Swedish citizens rather than other politicians. The politicians typically referred to each other in third person – commonly with full first and family names – rather than with the dialogical second-person pronoun you. Third-person addresses were made even though the politicians ostensibly answered each other in the parliamentary debates and commented on each other’s politics in the ‘democracy week’ at Almedalen. The politicians commonly employed the inclusive first-person pronouns we, us, and our to refer to themselves, the audience, and the ‘normal’ majority of Sweden. Thereby, the politicians positioned themselves, their audiences, and the ‘normal’ majority as having the same political and moral convictions. An example of the uses of the first and third person to address the audience and political opponents was provided by the leader of the social-conservative Sweden Democrats:

‘Friends of Sweden, visitors to Almedalen! The Social Democrats led by Stefan Löfven have become a hypocritical party of the worst sort, for which nothing but power means anything. It is in many ways a tragedy. Sweden and the Swedish people deserve better. But it is first and foremost a reason for us, friends of Sweden, to fight. Fight on – against hypocrisy and games of power – for Sweden. To continue our Swedish struggle!’ (Jimmie Åkesson, July 7th, 2019)

In the statement above, the leader of the Swedish democrats directly addressed the audience of the ‘normal’ majority of Swedes while referring to their political opponents, and denouncing them, in third person. By directly appealing to the audience as ‘friends of Sweden’, Jimmie Åkesson interpellated them as members of the majority population with solidarity with their nation (Althusser, 2008). The ‘Swedish struggle’ of the ‘normal’ majority against the ‘hypocritical’ politicians was in agreement with the nationalistic story line of the historical destiny and sovereignty of a ‘people’ (Calhoun, 1993). The story line implicitly drew upon the populist conception of a struggle between the victimized ‘people’ (the ‘normal’ majority) and the corrupt elite (the heterodox minority). In several instances of his speech, such as when citing the national literary icon Wilhelm Moberg at the introduction, the leader of the Swedish Democrats related the ‘Swedish struggle’ of the ‘normal’ majority to its historical experiences. These historical roots afforded a duty to care for the common tradition as well as a legacy of inherited rights. By contrast, one of the two leaders of the Environmental Party argued that rights were inalienable and equal, and that the ‘normal’ majority in fact supported an inclusive view of democracy:

‘We shall never accept those forces that seek to intimidate others into silence. The diversity march last year displayed exactly what the extremists are afraid of. That we are many and they
are a few. And we are many who will stand up for the equal value of every human being, compassion, and democracy.’ (Per Bolund, June 30th, 2019)

Through this statement, the leader of the Environmental Party positioned himself and the audience as the ‘normal’ majority protecting one of its ‘normal’ subgroups – in this case the subgroup of LGBTQ individuals – against intolerant Neo-Nazis. The problem with intolerance was ascribed to the heterodox political minority of Neo-Nazis rather than the ‘normal’ majority of citizens. As was noted above, intolerance of intolerance was considered normative. In a similar way, the leader of the conservative Christian Democratic Party denounced the intolerance of the political left:

‘But Nyamko Sabuni is one of those who used to have fights with the left-wing defamation machinery. She knows how indecent they can be. And I want to reach out directly to her: Break loose! You know that Stefan Löfven is not the right man to govern Sweden.’ (Ebba Busch Thor, July 6th, 2019)

By initially referring to the leader of the Liberal Party in third person, the leader of the Christian Democratic Party embedded her address in an appeal directed to the ‘normal’ majority in the audience. The denouncement of the ‘indecent’ left-wing parties positioned the leaders of the Christian Democratic Party and the Liberal Party, as well as the audience of the speech, on the same side in the political conflict. Presumably, references to political opponents helped form a sense of inclusion in the ‘normal’ majority by identifying a common outgroup (Benard and Doan, 2011). That is, inclusion in the ‘normal’ majority did not appear to be absolute but was relative to the outgroup – relative to the heterodox minority identified in the proclaimed discourse.

Discussion

To allow for an inclusive and critical debate about the category of victimhood in contemporary politics, knowledge is needed about the actual construction of victimhood in political discourse. To this end, the present study has sought to analyze the positioning of victims in speeches and addresses held by mainstream Swedish politicians. In total, eight longer political speeches and fifty-six addresses to the Swedish parliament, held over the course of a year, were analyzed through a discursive approach.

The results suggested that the ‘normal’ majority, comprising the most numerous and normative group of society, was positioned as the victim. At the same time, heterodox minorities with fundamentally different morals or political ambitions were positioned as offenders. The politicians sought to position themselves as members of the ‘normal’ majority to claim legitimacy when performing other positionings. Finally, the politicians positioned their audiences, too, as belonging to the ‘normal’ majority.

Victimhood in Swedish politics

The present study suggests that the discursive construction of victimhood can be clearly identified in mainstream Swedish politics. Swedish culture and history have been
influenced by communitarian values, promoted by parties such as the Social Democratic Party (Dahlstedt and Hertzberg, 2007; Edling, 2013). The discursive promotion of the ideals of consensus and egalitarianism has contributed to the domination of the ‘normal’ majority over heterodox minorities by rendering conformity a moral virtue (Bäck, 2003; Blanc-Noel, 2013; Dahlstedt and Hertzberg, 2007; Larsson et al., 2012). In the present study, the morals and politics of the ‘normal’ majority were discursively constructed as legitimate by mainstream politicians, while heterodox minorities with fundamentally different morals and political ambitions were discursively denounced as immoral outsiders.

It may be argued that contemporary Swedish political discourse has traces of the normative rule of the majority that previously in history contributed to infringements on the personal freedom of individuals in disadvantaged minority groups, such as forced sterilizations (Zaremba, 1999). Still, the meaning of victimhood has been inverted, from a stigmatizing category that used to imply risks of state repression and disciplination (Foucault, 1980; Zaremba, 1999) to one of deservingness that motivates support and compensation (Horwitz, 2018; Nietzsche, 2003). Thus, the precariousness of being a minority remains (Bäck, 2003; Dahlstedt and Hertzberg, 2007), but the identification of victimhood has received opposite implications and currently suggests rights for compensation rather than guilt (Campbell and Manning, 2018; Horwitz, 2018). The results of the present study underline the close relation, in contemporary Swedish politics, between the privileges of victimhood and the dominant discursive power of the ‘normal’ majority.

The results further suggest that heterodox minorities, which endorse fundamentally different morals and political ambitions than the ‘normal’ majority, are excluded from the rights of victimhood and the construction of the victimhood category. Inclusiveness involves promoting similar opportunities for different individuals and groups to enter dialogues as equal partners (Mill, 2015; Rawls, 2005). Arguably, the Swedish discourses of egalitarianism and consensus may contribute to the dominance of the ‘normal’ majority over heterodox minorities, by denouncing heterodox perspectives as immoral rather than entering in dialogue with them (Bäck, 2003; Dahlstedt and Hertzberg, 2007).

**Moving beyond victims and offenders**

A first step toward an inclusive construction of victimhood is acknowledging that the category of victimhood, and the authority to position victims, carry significant political power (Campbell and Manning, 2018; Harré et al., 2009; Horwitz, 2018). Individuals and groups that are excluded from the construction of victimhood, and who are unable to formulate and convince others of their victimhoods, are likely to be politically marginalized. The particularistic victimhoods of the heterodox minorities should not be considered less objective or universalistic, since the seemingly universal victimhoods of the ‘normal’ majority are not free from bias but rather stem from the dominance inherent in the majority position (Taylor, 1997).

The politicians in the present study mainly contrasted the victimhood of the ‘normal’ majority with the offences of heterodox minorities. In a few instances, another possibility was hinted at, namely that individuals could be both victims and offenders, which would defy the binary opposition between the two categories (Culler, 1982). The simultaneous identification of individuals as victims and offenders may appear contradictory, but it is conceivable from
the poststructural perspective on humans as multifaceted and complex, possessing several inconsistent ways of thinking and acting (Davies, 1991; Gavey, 1989). A more nuanced understanding of victimhood may be gained by acknowledging complex patterns of identifications that are socially constructed (Culler, 1982; Davies, 1991). The present study has implied this possibility by the variability of the content of the victimhood category – victims were consistently positioned as belonging to the ‘normal’ majority, but different minorities were included by the ‘normal’ majority or denounced as heterodox minorities depending on the ideological orientations of the politicians uttering the discourse.

Furthermore, the politics of victimhood and disgust, which confer sympathy and blame, are based on competitive struggles over positionings rather than attempts at dialogue and understanding (Horwitz, 2018; Nussbaum, 2010). An alternative to this competitive struggle would be the politics of humanity, according to which all individuals are free to follow their own convictions as long as they do not harm anyone else, and for which individuals need to seek genuine empathy, reasonable dialogues, and understanding (Mill, 2015; Nussbaum, 2010; Rawls, 2005). Unlike the politics of victimhood and disgust, the politics of humanity do not relate to individuals as objects defined by others’ actions but as subjects with inalienable rights to autonomy and respect (Nussbaum, 2010; Rawls, 2005). Thereby, the politics of humanity can be inclusive of deviant individuals and heterodox minorities.

Conclusion

The politics of victimhood have been increasingly brought to attention by researchers, and the positioning of victims is an important feature of mainstream political debates. The present study argues that there is a discursive pattern in Swedish politics, indicating that the ‘normal’ majority claims the victimhood category, while heterodox minorities are identified as offenders. The ostensible victimhood of the ‘normal’ majority risks reproducing the moral and political domination of the ‘normal’ majority over heterodox minorities and providing the majority population, and its political representatives, with a monopoly control over victimhood discourse. To protect the freedom and equality of individuals and groups in diverse liberal democracies, it is reasonable to seek inclusive and tolerant dialogues regarding the construction of victimhood, rather than denunciations of deviant individuals and heterodox minorities that are considered too immoral to be included in the debate.

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