

Sociology 4099: Victimology

Lecture Notes Week 1.2 Victimology and Social Theory

The wealth of data collected mainly through victimization surveys has led to various theoretical formulations to help us better explain and predict victimization. Models have been developed to offer plausible explanations for the variations in victimization risks, and for the clustering of victimization in certain areas and certain groups. Four major types of theoretical formulations have emerged:

- (i) Radical theories that emphasize social power relations as reflected in socio-structural, cultural, and institutional factors;
- (ii) Situation-oriented theories (already discussed in your readings);
- (iii) Feminist theories; and
- (iv) Critical victimology.

In the first group, radical victimological theories stress socio-structural, cultural, and institutional factors. Patterns of victimization are seen as reflections of economic and power relations, and theory stresses the rhetoric of human rights for neglected populations (Galtung 1969; Elias 1985: 17; Schneider 2000: 5). For example, radical scholars have questioned the part played by the capitalist state in defining offender and victim, concentrating instead on Avictims of police force, the victims of war, the victims of the correctional system, the victims of state violence, the victims of oppression of any sort@ (Quinney 1972: 315).

Within this first group, we can find three subgroups or variations - all of which emphasize how different aspects of socially organized power impacts upon risk of victimization. The first group emphasizes that patterns of victimization reflect the economic and power structure of a society. *Socio-cultural* theorists argue that marginalized, powerless minorities that have been pushed towards the edge of society are often forced into becoming victims. Structural violence and discrimination turns into personal violence (Galtung); social discrimination turns into personal violence (K. Sessar). The social pressure imposed on marginalized minorities leads to social disorganization, decay of relations and communities causing a propensity to become a victim (D. Smith, G. Jajoura, T. Miethe and D. McDowell). The Australian Aborigines who have been deprived of their culture and identity and whose numbers have been decimated by 1/2 can be given as an example here. Similarly, it has been argued that the killing of female infants and dowry homicide in India is but an extreme manifestation of a patriarchal social structure. In this respect, the neglect of and killing of girls as well as the burning of women are seen as merely symptoms of a socio-structural discrimination against women in

Indian society. Moreover, since much of this has to do with the economics of dowries, the ideology of the subordination of women is linked to the economic production structures as well.

The second subcategory of this first group involves *cultural* theorists. These writers argue that customs, tradition, religion, and the ideology of society are the subjective form of socio-structural victimization, since the structure of the economy and the system of power influence views, value concepts, and the stereotypes of a society (Berrill, Schulthess, and Hunter). Hate crimes that are characterized by the symbolic status of the crime victim constitute an example. Victims, such as gays, belong to an outsider group symbolizing that which the insider group (to which the offender belongs) does not want to be. Offences like gay bashing, then, serve to affirm the solidarity and identity of the insider group and at the same time to strengthen the feeling of self-assurance of group members. In this context, heterosexism is a cultural, ideological system that rejects and stigmatizes non-heterosexual forms of behavior, identity, relationships, and communities. One is here dealing with an ideology of suppression that manifests itself in social customs, religious and legal institutions, individual views and styles of conduct. Homosexuality, in this example, is stigmatized as being illegal (in some places), sinful and morbid. The heterosexual cultural ideology defines what is to be viewed as "masculinity" and "femininity." As the concepts associated with "masculinity" and "femininity" are learned at a very young age, they often appear "natural" to an adult: homosexuality is felt to be abnormal.

Finally, there is the third sub-group of those theories that emphasize power relations: *institutional* theorists (Schneider, Seligman). Such writers take the above arguments one step further, and look at the functioning of institutions within such a power structure. They not only look at victimization within institutions, but also at victimization by institutions themselves. Examples of the former includes violence in nursing homes, in schools, and in prisons. The cause of violence can be found in the staff members of the institution and its inmates, but it can also lie in the structure of the institution. In this latter respect, the emphasis is on how bureaucratic procedures, uneven power distribution, and management styles within institutions function to victimize those being "served" by staff. Bureaucratic, formalistic impersonality can prevail within relatively isolated institutions, and the persons within can be without mutual social relations. Inmates can thus become mere work objects, lifeless abstractions for which the staff feels no personal responsibility. There is too great a gap between the low number of staff and the large group of inmates. Power is unilaterally distributed: decision-making and control is completely on the side of staff members who always feel superior and in the right. The inmates, in contrast, are powerless. Moreover, they have largely been deprived of their

sphere of privacy and their personal belongings. They are even excluded from decisions affecting their own personal destiny. This group has no more control over itself. Everything is regimented. Its role is ultimately a purely reactive one; it can no longer develop initiatives on its own.

Institutional violence can, of course, also have functional causes. Here an authoritarian management style plays an essential role: if the position of power established between the staff and inmates is unilaterally allocated to the staff group, and if the power imbalance is made socially visible by symbols of power and the individuality of people is restricted, social power becomes the main dimension of behavior through which everyone and everything is defined. The staff group, given basically unlimited power over the powerless inmates, is inclined to misuse its superior status and exert authoritarian and violent behavior. The powerless inmate group is dominated and subjected to virtually every kind of debasement. The inmates soon fall into a process of psycho-social degradation. After initial resistance it learns and accepts its own depreciation, its growing dependence and indulgence at an astonishing pace. It develops a tendency to feel defeated, inferior, weak, reproachable and guilty victims.

Essentially, these structural theories focus on power relations to explain the data and predict victimization. The major difference between them is the particular aspect of power relations that they emphasize in so doing: social structural elements (e.g. political economy; patriarchal gender relations); cultural ideologies (e.g. mandatory heterosexism); or institutional elements (e.g. bureaucratic "help agencies"). It is important to recognize that each of these approaches has merit, and that all such factors should be considered - with varying degrees of emphasis depending on the subject matter - when looking at coming to an understanding of particular instances of victimization.

Despite the diverse insights provided above, many early radical approaches did little to establish an empirical body of knowledge, and often provided an oversimplified rendering of class, law and state to the relative detriment of gender, race and age (Mawby and Walklate 1994: 16; Walklate, 2000: 187). Radical left realists called for an >accurate victimology= which starts with the >problems as people experience them,= which analysed the social and geographic distribution of victimization (Young 1986: 23-24). While relying heavily on victimization surveys, radical left realism aimed to incorporate known facts about age, sex, class and race patterns to improve estimates of racial and sexual harassment, as well as disproportionate victimization by commercial crime. Nevertheless, such an approach left itself open to the charge of a >latent slippage into positivism= (Walklate 2000: 187-188).

But, as noted at the outset, there is also a second broad group of victim-oriented theories. Situation-oriented theories, as they are commonly known, focus more on specific, contextual interactions between victims and offenders than structural variables. In many respects this different emphasis reflects the ongoing divide in victimology, noted last class, between victim activists and academic researchers. For example, rather than emphasize socially structured power relations, many situation-oriented theorists look at the interaction between the alleged offender and victim. Hence, one subcategory of situation-oriented theories gives us the controversial concept of victim precipitation (Wolfgang, 1958), which sees the origin of victimization in a misguided *offender-victim interaction* where victim behavior is *misinterpreted* by the offender. On the other hand, *lifestyle theories* (Garafalo, 1978) assert that victimization is associated with certain lifestyles, with constantly recurring behaviors where one is exposed to situations bearing a high risk of victimization. This has evolved into the routine activity theory (Cohen and Felson, 1979), which asserts that three elements are essential for victimization: the existence of motivated offenders, the presence of a suitable target object for criminal action, and the absence of persons effectively able to protect the target against a violation of the law. The central factors underlying this approach are opportunity, proximity/exposure, and facilitating factors. A number of variations on these situation-oriented models have emerged, such as the opportunity model (Cohen et.al, 1981), the Dutch model (Van Dijk and Steinmetz), and the comprehensive system proposed by Fattah (1991).

Let us consider the controversial concept of victim precipitation in more detail first. An important line of theoretical inquiry into victim processes emphasizes the situational nature of victim-offender interactions. For example, Wolfgang (1958) discovered that 1 in 4 Philadelphia homicides the victim was the first party to engage in some form of aggressive action (he called such murders "victim-precipitated"). He also raised the question of the interpretation or misinterpretation of behavior by the offender. This raised doubts about the stereotype of a completely innocent victim and a completely guilty offender. This argument has been expanded beyond homicide to include other types of crime such as assault, robbery, even rape (Amir, 1971). Of course, this has been widely criticized by activists as "victim blaming," as well as being overly simplistic. In recent years attempts have been made to move beyond simple victim precipitation, looking more fully at the interaction between the offender and the victim. Luckenbill, for example, analyzed murder as a "situated transaction" where homicide is frequently the result of a "character contest." These take the form of a gamelike confrontation in which both the offender and the victim each attempt to save face at the expense of the other. Others, such as Felson and Steadman (1983) have attempted to broaden this approach to criminal violence more generally. While rooted in the concept of victim precipitation,

such analyses provide important elaborations - and a more balanced assessment of the role played by victims in the generation of crime. Kennedy and Sacco even suggest broadening this approach to what they call a "criminal event perspective" emphasizing a detailed temporal analysis of the victimizing event.

The second subcategory of situation-oriented theories tend to focus a lot more on the structure of the criminal opportunity. Like in your reading where Kennedy and Sacco suggest that even the most highly motivated, talented, and well-trained piano player can't do so without access to a piano, offenders cannot commit victimizations without access to an appropriate victim. Unlike traditional theories of crime that assume that victimization opportunities are present and then attempt to explain why some people exploit them, situation-oriented theories assert that it is the supply of opportunities that requires explanation. In short, we need to ask what it is that people do that presents offenders with criminal opportunities.

There have been a number of attempts to answer this question. Perhaps the first would be Hindelang, Gottfredson and Garofalo's (1978) lifestyle exposure theory. This tries to explain why some groups, such as young males, ethnic and economic minorities, face much higher risks of victimization than others. Their explanation centers around lifestyle: a concept defined in terms of daily activities of both a vocational and leisure nature: patterned ways in which people distribute their time and energies across a range of activities. The argument is that some lifestyles are more likely than others to put people at risk of criminal victimization (e.g. those that regularly put a person on the street or in bars late at night, or brings them into regular contact with young, male members of certain economic and ethnic minority groups). They sum up their theory with 8 basic propositions:

- 1.The more time individuals spend in public places (especially at night), the more likely it is that they will be victimized;
- 2.Following certain lifestyles makes an individual more likely to frequent public places;
- 3.The interactions that individuals maintain tend to be with persons who share their lifestyles;
- 4.The probability that an individual will be a victim increases to the extent to which victims and offenders belong to the same demographic categories;
- 5.The proportion of time one spends in places where there is a large number of non-family members varies according to lifestyle;
- 6.The chance that an individual will be a victim of crime (particularly theft) increases in conjunction with the amount of time he or she spends among nonfamily members;

7. Differences in lifestyle relate to individuals' ability to isolate themselves from those with offender characteristics;
8. Variations in lifestyle influence the convenience, desirability, and ease of victimizing an individual.

According to this theory, then, rates of personal victimization are relatively high for young minority males because these individuals tend to associate with people who are likely to offend (i.e. other young, minority males) and because they tend to frequent places (e.g. bars) where offending often occurs. An elderly woman, in contrast, is likely to associate with others like herself (whose level of offending is relatively low) and to avoid high risk settings. Lifestyle, in a sense, structures victimization opportunities.

A related approach is Cohen and Felson's (1979) routine activity theory, which attempts to explain variations in victimization rates independently of changes in the size of the offender population (e.g. the rising crime in the 1960's). They argued that there is a need to focus on the way that social changes in the period increased the supply of criminal opportunities. For "direct contact predatory violations" (i.e. victimizations) to occur, they argue that three elements must come together in time and space: (i) a motivated offender must come into contact with (ii) a suitable target; in the absence of (iii) capable guardianship (that might otherwise prevent the occurrence of victimization).

While most criminologists focus on the factors that motivate offenders, Cohen and Felson wanted to focus in on changes in the latter two factors. Specifically, they argue that since the end of WWII several changes have occurred in North American society to increase the likelihood of criminal victimization. For example, the world beyond the household has increasingly become the focus of routine activities. There has been a growth in the number of single person households, rising divorce rates and a tendency to marry later in life. All of these have shifted more routine activities away from the home. This increases the chance that people will come into contact with strangers, while leaving homes more empty and unguarded than in the past. Moreover, now there are many lightweight durable consumer goods (such as VCR's) more easily stolen than in the past. All these broad social changes have increased the likelihood that motivated offenders and suitable targets will converge in time and space in the absence of capable guardians. Thus, rates of direct contact victimization will be expected to climb. Indeed, it is argued that these changes will increase victimization levels even if the number of motivated offenders does not increase.

Of course, lifestyle exposure and routine activity theory share many common themes, and are often used interchangeably. But how is the

offender's motivation understood by these theories? It all goes back to classical rational hedonism. Of course, it is recognized that offenders do not always have all the information they need, so instead a limited rationality is posited.

Since these formulations, situation oriented theorists have examined a variety of problems. Some have gone on to focus on specific forms of victimization (e.g. arson); others have broadened the search for the types of lifestyle factors that increase victimization risk. Opportunity theory itself has undergone a number of extensions and refinements. For example, Sherman et. al. (1989) have focused their attention on the "hot spots" for crime in particular urban areas.

But most importantly, subsequent writers have attempted to make more explicit the concept of "opportunity." For example, Miethe and Mieir (1994) argue that two factors in addition to capable guardianship and target attractiveness can be identified. The first is proximity to crime (i.e. the physical distance between the areas where potential targets of crime reside and areas where large populations of potential offenders reside. The second, exposure to crime, is indicative of visibility or accessibility to crime. Exposure to personal crime is greater, for example, for those who spend large amounts of time in public places at night. Exposure to burglary is greater for houses that are located on a corner lot or have multiple points of entry.

Using these four concepts, Miethe and Mieir develop what they call a "structural choice theory of victimization." They argue that current theories of victimization suggest two propositions: (1) Routine activities or lifestyles create a structure of opportunity by enhancing the contact between potential offenders and potential victims; (2) The subjective value of the potential victimization target, whether it is a person or property, and the level of guardianship determine which targets are ultimately chosen. Taken together, these propositions imply that while patterns of routine activities expose some people or property to greater risks, the selection of any specific target depends upon the rewards and risks that are associated with that target rather than another. This means that proximity and exposure should be considered "structural factors" because they predispose people to differing levels of risk. On the other hand, target attractiveness and guardianship are best thought of as "choice components" because they determine which specific targets are selected in a context that has a particular level of risk associated with it.

Finally, it is important to note that several recent refinements to opportunity theory have stressed the need to take explicit account of the offender's role - most often from a "rational choice" perspective (Clarke and

Felson, 1993; Miethe and Mier, 1994; Sacco and Kennedy, 1996). The idea is that offenders rationally recognize that they will receive benefits from their crimes only if they make advantageous decisions about when, where, and who to victimize. Still, we have to recognize that we can only take this so far when offenders lack information, act impulsively, or have their judgements clouded by drugs or alcohol. Hence, while we need to remain cognizant of this factor, we should consider "limited" rather than "pure" rationality in this context.

Returning to our list at the outset, where it was indicated that there are two more broad categories of victimological theory, we will briefly deal now with (3) feminist theory; and (4) critical victimology.

The third broad group of victimological theories specifically highlight the role of gender. Traditionally, feminist scholars had a reserved relationship with victimology, criticizing positivist approaches as victim blaming or questioning the powerlessness implicit in the term victim as a female stereotype. They also challenged the very possibility of objective, value-free research and stressed victimization in areas not amenable to traditional victimization surveys - such as rape and domestic violence - in the supposedly safe haven of the home. Moreover, while the above radicals, particularly left realists, claim to consider the role of gender, feminism goes further by postulating patriarchy as the underlying factor behind such matters. While much of the research reflective of this approach has been qualitative in nature, and questions have been raised about its ability to sufficiently explain patterns of male victimization, feminist thought does lead us to question whether an alternate conception of the research process can set a more meaningful agenda for studying victims of crime (Young 1988; Walklate 2000: 188-189).

Finally, critical victimologists engage in analysis of the wider political, economic and social context of victimization. Specifically, the critical approach considers the broad social context in which some versions of victimology have become more prominent than others, seeking to understand how these are tied up with questions of policy response and service delivery. Critical victimologists seek to consider how the generative mechanisms of capitalism and patriarchy set the material conditions in which different victim movements have flourished, introducing a critical edge in understanding the effects that research agendas and policy initiatives may or may not have (Mawby and Walklate 1994: 21; Walklate 2000). Indeed, proponents also question why certain actions are criminal or not, adding that many harmful activities committed by wealthy or powerful individuals - and nations - are often not regarded crimes, such as genocide, war time rape, crimes involving abuse of power rarely appearing in the media (Wallace 2007: 14). Hence, a great deal of

this approach is, in fact, oriented towards power and its relationship to reality construction (e.g. who may be legitimately defined as a victim; the ideological manipulation of victim claims to promote repressive policies). Much like the power-reflexive perspective utilized by Pfohl (1994: 7-9) in attempting to assess the historical development of criminological theory, critical victimology:

. . . demands a research agenda which is both longitudinal and comparative, and which breaks down the barriers between quantitative and qualitative techniques. In the context of victimology this kind of starting point postulates the importance of understanding the processes which go on behind our backs, which contribute to the victims (and the crimes) which we >see= as well as those we do not >see,= in order to understand the >lived realities= of criminal victimization . . . This form of victimology makes no special claims to privilege one form of knowledge over another. Indeed, its only special claim would lie in the requirement to recognize the political nature of the knowledge production process (Walklate 2000: 190).

Each of the above approaches may provide varying levels of insight into various aspects of victimization, and it will be important to consider the differential insights of each when attending to any specific victimological problem.

Conclusion: Victims and Victim Theories:

The above theories counterbalance the disproportionate attention that criminologists have traditionally paid to offenders, emphasizing that we need to consider victims as well. Because they make problematic rather than assume the behavior of victims and potential victims, they encourage criminologists to ask questions about a number of important issues (e.g. relative risk and the victim's role in crime).

Yet critics have problems with many of these approaches. For example, the situation oriented theories have been traditionally been criticized as shifting the moral responsibility for crime from the offender to the victim. It is easy to see this reasoning, but the fact remains that we still need to make sense of the empirical character of victimization, and we need to understand why some kinds of people are more likely to become victims than others. We also need to understand how it is that the interactions between victims and offenders shape the outcomes of those interactions. Perhaps research in this area can in fact help us to reduce the risks for the most vulnerable groups.

Victim centred theories have generated a large body of data in recent years. Moreover, they are well supported by the existing body of empirical evidence. All the same, critics argue that the usefulness of such theories depends on the ability of researchers to overcome crude formulations such as "lifestyle" and "routine activities." They also would like to see more attention to structural contexts (e.g. wider community settings, specific settings such as the workplace), as well as broader attention to victimless, corporate and white-collar crime.

Feminist theory and critical victimology point to areas that have been insufficiently considered in either of the above approaches, and, feminism in particular, is generating much significant research. Critical victimology shows great promise, particularly in relation to reality construction, but more needs to be done.

Hence, the practical value of all theories will depend on the ability of theorists and researchers to overcome the limitations of current approaches. We have to move beyond crude and general measures of key concepts such as "lifestyle." We also have to pay more attention to the relationship(s) between lifestyle activities and the wider structural, cultural and institutional settings in which power is exercised. Finally, we need to always keep an eye to gender and the constitutive, reality construction aspects of any victimological endeavour.