

Sociology 4099: Victimology

Lecture Notes Week 2.4 : Victimization Surveys: Problems and Alternatives

The chief advantages of victimization surveys over official statistics are that: (i) respondents are asked about theoretically relevant concerns; and (ii) they weed out public decisions not to report or police decisions not to record, resulting in improved estimates of crime and victimization.

Yet, there are numerous problems with these methods. First, such studies depend upon victims *knowing* that they have been victimized and offenders knowing that they have committed a crime. For example, victims of fraud may not know that they have been cheated, and some obscure criminal acts may not be recognized as such by respondents unless brought to their attention. Moreover, what some individuals would perceive as abusive, others deny and excuse.

Secondly, standardized surveys, in which researchers attempt to ask all respondents the same questions in the same way, can sometimes be insensitive to cultural factors that affect the manner in which individuals *interpret* certain matters. Gomme (1993) gives the example of child abuse, which may be interpreted differently by cultures that consider a certain amount of "spanking" in the child's best interest, and not meaning the same thing as "hitting" the child. Fixed choice questionnaires may be useful, but they depend upon interpretive inferences and context-bound judgements about what is or isn't a meaningful answer to a pre-packaged question. Many respondents are unable to "get into" or hear questions in the same way as those who made them up. This is because respondents, when asked to choose an answer, are likely to be involved in an entirely different set of interpretive relevancies than researchers."

Third, respondents may not always be honest in their answers. Some may be reluctant to confess having done bad things or having experienced them. Some may be embarrassed or ashamed of having been the victim of some forms of crime, or fear revenge.

Fourth, the accuracy of data may suffer due to the faulty memories of respondents. Respondents may either forget incidents, or "telescope" prior events forward in time to the period covered by the survey. Indeed, Gomme suggests that there may be a "class bias" in survey results due to the fact that educated people are more likely to recall events and describe them accurately. This means that lower-class persons and "disadvantaged" members of certain minority groups may give artificially low estimates of both their victimization experiences and their criminal involvements.

Fifth, many subjects will seek to give socially desirable answers or please the researcher, tempering their views in light of their beliefs about what the interviewer wants to hear.

Sixth, inquiring about only *some* offences limits the accuracy of overall estimates

of crime based on these surveys. According to Gomme, self-report surveys enumerate mostly trivial offences. Victimization surveys do not ask questions about respondents' experiences with consensual vice crimes. Respondents' involvement in "victimless" crimes such as drug use, gambling, and prostitution remain unmeasured. Other crimes regularly omitted from victimization studies include disturbing the peace and public drunkenness. Furthermore, since victimization studies confine themselves to individuals as respondents, they provide no estimates of crimes, such as vandalism and arson, that are most often suffered by organizations.

Seventh, how researchers choose respondents for inclusion in their samples may affect generalizability. Some may use nonrandom samples based on student rosters or urban households - thereby ignoring the often important experiences of dropouts, street youth, small town and rural residents, and transients.

Finally, because "serious" crime is comparatively rare, researchers must draw very large samples in order to get at the entire range of offences. This can be very expensive and time-consuming.

Despite these objections, however, so long as one does not reify survey data as "the Truth," it can bring some suggestive descriptive information to bear on existing theoretical formulations in the "big picture." The images of deviance and crime provided from official sources and surveys of victims and criminals can be likened to aerial photographs. While such snapshots offer, from distant vantage points, informative glimpses of broad and general patterns, they unavoidably leave obscure much of the finer detail regarding the nature and processes of involvement in crime and victimization. However, one must be cautious. To color in the rough sketches provided by such methods other, inductive, and more qualitative methods are required.

One Alternative: An Interactionist Approach:

Conventional victimology, and many programs based on its tenets, theoretically *presupposes* the objectivity of certain individuals or groups as victims, without first considering the interpretive, definitional *processes* involved in the social construction of this status. In contrast, the theoretical assumption underlying Holstein and Miller's seminal (1990) paper is that crime victims are interactionally constituted.

If victim is analytically construed as a label that formulates reality, our notion of how one becomes a victim is radically transformed. We can conceive of victimization as descriptive practice - the interpretive and representational process for assigning victim status to ourselves and others. Victimization then becomes interactional activity that underpins victims' reality status. Describing someone as a victim is more than merely reporting about a feature of the social world: it constitutes that world (Holstein and Miller, 1990: 105) (Emphasis in original).

By thus dropping this unexamined premise, researchers are freed to look at “victims” from a new angle, enabled to analyze the specific interactional dynamics, the subtle “victim assignment practices” involved when initially confused, traumatized, and vulnerable individuals either learn to adopt, or resist being cast into the crime victim role. Specifically, by focusing on those practices that are “seen but unnoticed” (Garfinkel, 1967, much may be learned about “victims” cope which may not be apparent otherwise. Essentially, what Holstein and Miller are saying is that we have to refocus on the social processes through which persons become “victims.”

Holstein and Miller argue that people become, or are “produced” as victims, by engaging in, or co-operating with, practical political activity that is abetted by a “rhetoric of victimization.” They argue that it is important to consider how such “victim assignment practices” operate to assemble and assign meaning in everyday life. Specifically, they argue that “if deviants are constituted through public definition and dramatization of evil, then we might also view the production of “victims” as the public articulation and dramatization of injury and innocence.” Engaging in descriptive practices of this sort may be seen as forms of purposeful social action that meaningfully organize aspects of persons’ everyday lives.

Holstein and Miller argue that a person is “victimized” when s/he is nominated for membership in the “victim” category. Calling someone a victim organizes understandings of that person as a particular *type* to whom certain characteristics are attributed and orientations are taken. Specifically, calling someone a victim encourages others to see how the labeled person has been harmed by forces beyond his/her control, simultaneously establishing the “fact” of injury and locating responsibility for the damage outside the “victim.” This discourse of “victimization,” if validated by others, is this practically situated social action that promotes practical definitions of everyday circumstances. An act of interpretive reality construction, it advises persons how they should understand persons, circumstances and behaviors under consideration.

Of course, there are practical consequences to all of this. As parties to a troubling situation negotiate its definition, sources, and resolutions, the trouble is consolidated around understandings of who is responsible and who has been injured, processes which often involve victimization. Most generally, the interpretive instructions implicit in the label of victim involve procedures for deflecting responsibility, assigning causes, specifying responses and remedies, and accounting for failure:

1. *Deflecting responsibility*: Accepting the label of victim is a method for absolving persons of responsibility. When trouble emerges, an “innocent” party – the object of injury or trouble – can be specified by assigning victim status to one or more persons, thus exempting them from blame. This emphasizes particular aspects of person’s conduct and character while glossing over others that might paint them in a less favorable light.
2. *Assigning Causes*: Categorizing a person as a victim also instructs others to identify the sources of harm. Assigning victim status, then, implicitly designates a victim’s complementary opposition – a perpetrator or victimizer – at the same time. This can

actually work both ways. A victim and a victimizer go hand in hand in our commonsense discourse, and the dramatization of innocence and evil happen when either is posited in respect of a problematic situation.

3. *Specifying Responses and Remedies*: Troubles are typically described for the purpose of doing something about them. Designating victims not only contributes to the specification of trouble, but is also central to the formulation of responses and remedies. Specifically, victimizing someone suggests that the person deserves help or compensation, while indicating that others should be sanctioned or provide restitution for the harm. Indeed, failure to sanction wrongdoers and/or provide restitution may be portrayed as a second victimization increasing the harm done to innocent persons.

4. *Accounting for Failure*: In addition to denying responsibility for particular actions, designating oneself or another as a victim provides an economical way of telling others that the performance or activity at hand should not be taken to exemplify the nature, quality or potential of either the actor engaged in it, or the activity itself. In this way, we may legitimately account for failures, oversights, or other unsatisfactory performances (e.g. work). Victimization is thus a rhetoric for preserving good intentions and ideals by discounting failures in their realization. It does not deny failure; rather, it invites such a conclusion while maintaining the person's integrity. A sense of competence is maintained by portraying persons as dissatisfied, yet helpless in relation to the circumstances militating against their success.

As a result of the potential practical benefits above, some individuals make an effort to engage in "victim contests" to control the definition of the situation when a troubling situation is before them. Essentially, in many cases claims to victimization are not easily established. Resistance is common, sides form up, and each tends to make claims that they are the "real" or the "biggest" victim in the situation. As such, portrayals of victims and the causes of victimization become topics of open disputes and negotiation. Moreover, victim status may be assigned and then withdrawn in response to changing circumstances, understandings, or political considerations (e.g. criminal trials or restorative justice sessions).

Essentially, this shows that victim status is dependent on the interpretive enterprise of those reporting and describing events. Such instances also epitomize the political character of description. If "victim" is regarded as a claim about the world, then belief in the "factual" status of the description depends upon such things as credibility, influence, and warrant for honoring one set of claims over another. The version that is treated as real is this a product of Foucault's (1972) politics of description, with victim status depending as much on the identities, bases of influence, rhetorics and counter-rhetorics of contesting parties as it does on the characteristics of the candidate "victims" themselves. These all represent analyzable topics for an interactional analysis.

In the end, Holstein and Miller argue that a theoretical and methodological focus on victimization as social action avoids many of the pitfalls found in earlier victimology (e.g. simply studying persons who are commonsensically and non-reflectively assumed to

be victims). This has:

- The potential for exciting research at both the micro (interactional/observational) level and the macro (social problems/public discourse) levels
- It opens up questions not adequately addressed by official statistics and victimization surveys
- It requires more inductive, qualitative research strategies (ethnographic observation and interviews, discourse analysis)

Such a theoretical and methodological shift, while not ruling out the possible utility of other methods in a broader contextual sense, will help victimologists look at issues of victimization in a more comprehensive fashion. Such processual analyses, when triangulated or “cross-checked” with other methodologies, will ultimately help us to develop far more comprehensive, well-rounded understandings of victims and victimization than have hitherto been the case.