Sociology 4099: Victimology

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Overheads Class 1.2: Victimology and Social Theory:

Data collected through victimization surveys have led to various theoretical formulations to explain victimization. Two major groups:

(1) *Theories that emphasize political economy/ power relations within society;*
(2) *Situation-oriented theories;*
(3) *Feminist theories; and*
(4) *Critical victimology.*

In the *first group* we find:

(a) *Structural theorists*: marginalization and disempowerment of minorities forces them to become victims (e.g. Johann Galtung; Dorothy Smith)

"Structural violence becomes personal violence"

Examples: Australian Aborigines
India: female infanticide and dowry homicide

(b) *Cultural theorists*: customs & traditions serve as legitimating stereotypes

Examples: Hate crimes
Heterosexism
Gay bashing

(c) *Institutional Theorists*: institutions serving minorities reflect/embody
   uneven societal power structure.

   Examples: Victimization within institutions (e.g. prisons, rest homes)
             Victimization by institutions (e.g. bureaucracy, uneven
             power, management styles)

All the above theories emphasize different aspects of social power to explain/ predict victimization

   In the *second group*, we find theorists that emphasize:

- *Victim-offender interaction*

- *The structure of criminal opportunities*

(a) *Victim-offender interaction*:

* Wolfgang (1958) Victim precipitation in homicides (i.e. 25%)

* Luckenbill (1979) Homicide as a situated transaction between parties (i.e.
   mutual escalation/ attempts to save face).

(b) *The structure of criminal opportunities*:

Hindelang et. al (1978) Lifestyle exposure theory: 8 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 non-family 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.

* Cohen and Felson (1979) Routine activity theory. Victimization requires 3 elements to come together in time and space:

       (i) A motivated offender
       (ii) A suitable target
       (iii) Absence of suitable guardianship

* Focus on changes in last two elements, especially since WWII

* Additional refinements of opportunity theories:

- Sherman (1989) "Hot spots" of crime
- Miethe and Mieir (1994): Proximity to crime and exposure to crime

* Miethe and Mieir: "Structural choice theory of victimization"

- routine activities/lifetyles influence risk
- proximity/exposure influence choice/target selection

* Emphasis on the offender's "rational choice" (Clark and Felson, 1993;
    Miethe and Mieir, 1994; Sacco and Kennedy 1996). This is seen as
    "limited," not pure rationality

In the *third group* we find:

- Feminist theories of victimization that highlight gender, patriarchy, and:

    - emphasize the "victim blaming" nature of much victimological theory
    - challenge the possibility of objective, value-free research
    - go further than other "radical" approaches in dealing with gender
    - stress victimization in areas not amenable to traditional research

    Finally, the *fourth group* involves critical victimology, an approach that:

    - questions how some versions of victimology have become prominent in policy response / others not
    - looks at which victimological questions have become prominent and asks why others have not in given social contexts

- emphasizes the relationship between socially organized power and reality construction
- emphasizes longitudinal and comparative research methods to get at such issues

Conclusion:

- Victim theories useful:

  - As counterbalance to overemphasis on offender
  - Much supporting data exists

- Problems:

  - Situation oriented theories are criticized as "blaming victim"
  - Crude concepts like "lifestyle" and "routine activities"
  - Situation oriented theories pay insufficient attention to structural/
    power contexts
  - Insufficient attention to corporate, white collar, and so-called
    "victimless" crimes
  - Feminist theory largely qualitative and has some difficulties
    explaining male victimization
  - Critical victimological research often faces official/unofficial
    obstacles

* Victimological theory thus must be expanded, refined and elaborated. Nevertheless, each perspective may be useful in shedding light on particular aspects of given victimological problems.