

Sociology 4099: Victimology

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Overheads Week 3: The Impact of Victimization:

This week we will look at the impact of the victimization experience on individuals. We will consider the following :

- (1) The “official position” often presented by crime victim advocates;
- (2) The general social science research on the impact of victimization;
- (3) Viano’s processual model centred around claims to victim identity;

Following this, I will present aspects of my research on:

- (4) Initial claims to victim identity;
- (5) “Metaphors of Loss” in homicide cases.

(1) The “Official” Position: Crime Victim Advocates:

Bard and Sangrey (1986):

* Focus on violation of the self.

* Impact of victimization has 3 stages:

- (i) Impact;
- (ii) Recoil;
- (iii) Recovery.

* Impact stage:

- Sense of personal integrity shattered
- Self becomes disorganized and confused
- Shock, disbelief, numbness, immobilization
- Eating, sleeping problems

* Recoil stage:

- Struggle to adapt
- Attempts to reintegrate self
- Dealing with fear, anger, sadness, self-pity and guilt
- Defenses: avoid or confront feelings in small doses

* Recovery stage:

- Self becoming reorganized
- Increased emotional energy
- Less preoccupation with event
- Put experience in perspective

Kate Reidel (1990):

* Utilized Bard and Sangrey's 3 stages

* Discussed in relation to victims' needs at each stage:

- (i) Safety
- (ii) Somebody to listen
- (iii) Direction
- (iv) Assistance
- (v) Information

Marlene Young (1991):

* Renamed Bard and Sangrey's 3 stages in homicide cases:

- (i) Acute crisis
- (ii) Effort to survive
- (iii) "Living after death"

* All 3 writers argue that impact of victimization unfolds in stage-like fashion

* Questions:

- Does everybody follow these in same fashion?
- If not, are they stages?
- How to conceptualize denial?
- Do these apply only to violent crime?

(2) General Social Science Research:

* Kennedy and Sacco (1998): Victimization questions 3 life assumptions:

- (i) Our invulnerability
- (ii) Meaningfulness of the world
- (iii) Positive view of self and actions

* From *individual* standpoint, a fundamental reassessment process follows. This depends on:

- Self blame
- Cognitive restructuring
- Social support

* More generally, *objective* vs *subjective* measurements of impact.

- *Objective* measurements focus on material losses
- *Subjective* measures focus on psychological impact

* Objective Measures:

- Annual cost in U.S. (1996): \$450 Billion
- Includes losses of productivity, medical care, police & fire costs
- Behavioral costs significant
- Economic impact on third parties

* Subjective Measures:

- Impact on quality of life (e.g. long term trauma, lifestyle changes)
- In many cases victims learn to cope
- Extreme cases may result in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Battered Woman Syndrome (BWS)
- Emotional impact of property crime.
- Subsequent victimizing behaviors?

* Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):

- Recognized psychiatric disorder in DSM
- Experience of event “outside the range of usual human experiences”
- Intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and flashbacks
- Emotional numbing and avoidance
- Increased physiological arousal

* Symptom checklists: (i) Symptom Checklist 90-R
(ii) Global Severity Index

* Riggs (1992) Sexual assault victims score significantly higher on these, even years after incident

* While applicable to intimate violence, was not frequently used until 1980's

- Domestic violence “not outside range of usual human experience”
- Blaming victims for violent behavior
- Psychological symptoms often attributed to other causes

* Battered Woman Syndrome became accepted as variant in 1980's

- Changes in perceptions of safety/ vulnerability
- Expectations of future violence

- Perceptions of no ability to control violence/helplessness
- Lack of alternatives to own violence
- Now courts see as special type of self-defense plea

* Emotional impact of property crime:

- Guilt, feeling threatened
- Loss of extension of self
- Increased suspicion and distrust

* Relationship between victimization & subsequent victimizing behaviors:

- Cycle of violence: one learns to be violent (experience/observation)
- Prior research often methodologically flawed
- Widom (1989) found evidence for relationship
- Need to develop effective intervention techniques

(3) Viano's Processual Model of Victim Identity:

Viano (1989) focuses on definition of victim identity in 4 stages:

- (i) The experience of harm caused by another
- (ii) Perception of the harm as undeserved, unfair or unjust (self as victim)
- (iii) Attempts to get others to recognize harm and victim status
- (iv) Validation of claims to victim status and support.

“Victim” is defined as someone passing through all of these stages.

* Stage 1:

- Suffering illegal injury or harm
- May or may not see self as victim (e.g. cultural beliefs, denial)

* Stage 2:

- Come to view self as victim of unfair, undeserved action
- Facilitated by drastic social changes that overcome rationalizations
- Underwritten by loss of control, support, and emotional well-being

* Stage 3:

- Claims to victimization
- Attempts to validate experience
- Factors: odds of catching offender, relationship, harm suffered, expense and time, bureaucracy, privacy, potential ridicule and revenge

* Stage 4:

- Social recognition of victims' claim
- Depends on welcoming vs. hostile social context for specific victims
- Involves active effort, external assertion of predictable safety, and active help from others

(4) Initial Victim Identity: My Research:

In 1999-2000 I conducted a study of:

- 24 clients and 5 support staff of Provincial Victim Services
- 10 clients and 6 support workers at a local women's shelter/ outreach
- 12 clients and 10 support volunteers of impaired driving organization

Purpose: examine if victimization necessarily results in victim identity.
Three groups were found:

- (i) 31.9% did not exhibit initial victim identity despite victimization
- (ii) 51% saw victim identity as automatically emerging from incident

(iii) 17.1% for whom this relationship was unclear

* In the *first* group:

- Open denial of victim status
- Unclear how to describe self
- Interpreting situation differently
- Saw others more as victims
- Own abilities as evidence not victims
- Corroborated by support workers

*In the *second* group:

- Initial perception of victim status flowing from victimization
- Rationales:

Changing as a person

Damage to self

Actions of offender

Betrayal

Concomitants (low self-esteem, fear, helplessness)

Loss of freedom

Personal suffering (physical, emotional, cognitive)

- Corroborated by support workers

* In the *third* group:

- Initial victim status unclear due to:

No clear answer, but noting associated traits

Denying or minimizing victim status despite associated traits

Claiming victim status despite evidence of opposite traits

- Support staff added to this confusion
- It ultimately comes down to objective vs. subjective definitions.

- Objectivity is a questionable concept, and involves attributions of “false consciousness”
- Subjective criteria face problems of self-presentation

* Ultimately, this research shows that victimization does not necessarily result in a victim identity. Many other factors are involved.

(5) Homicide: My Research on “Metaphors of Loss”

In 1994-1998 I conducted a study of the family and loved ones of homicide victims. This involved the collection, transcription, and analysis of:

- (i) 32 interviews;
- (ii) 22 surveys; and
- (iii) 108 Criminal Injuries Compensation files.

Two of the questions I examined were:

- (1) How such crimes impact on the selves of family/loved ones;
- (2) The meanings disclosed to these individuals by their emotional experiences

* I discovered that survivors articulated a rich series of metaphors to illustrate the impact of the crime, which were termed *metaphors of loss*.

* These attempted to convey, insofar as words may, the effect of homicide on those close to the deceased.

* They constitute *typical ways survivors use to express both their loss of self, and the existential meanings disclosed to them by the emotions inherent to their experiences*.

This section reviews and compares survivors’ use of these typical metaphors as follows:

- (1) The various metaphors are illustrated and discussed in relation to

survivors gendered identities in *descending order of frequency in the data*;

(2) The *contexts* in which survivors utilize these metaphors will be examined, with an emphasis on when they were used, how, with what purpose, and whether they varied according to specific type of loss.

(i) Loss of Self:

*The single most common metaphors expressed by survivors were those indicating a generalized *loss of self*. Subjects using such metaphors typically asserted that they "*lost part of themselves*" when the deceased was killed.

Examples: "Like an amputation";

"Having one's heart torn out";

"I feel like I'm half gone").

"A void," "vacuum," "a hole," "blackness," having an "empty heart," feeling "hollow" and "dead inside."

- It is significant to note that these general metaphors were frequently *generalized beyond survivors alone*

Examples: To family;

To an intimate group that had included the deceased;

To the community at large (e.g. "ripple effect")

(ii) Permanent Loss of Future:

* The various metaphors signifying a generalized loss of self related clearly to other metaphors where various *dimensions* of loss were elaborated.

- For example, the next most frequent type of metaphor expressed by survivors were those signifying that they had presently suffered (a) a *personal loss of future* that was, (b) by its very nature *permanent*.

Examples:

"It's as though your life is going along in one direction, and then something happens and it takes a right angle turn, and *your whole future is just sliced away.*"

"The loss will always be with me forever";

"Our lives have been *"irrevocably changed"*

"I feel stuck at the point when I first heard of his murder."

(iii) Violating Devastation:

Survivors frequently expressed the view that they:

- (a) felt *personally violated* by the murder; and that this
- (b) left behind a *devastation* that penetrated to the very core of their being.

Examples of (a):

- Comparing the effect of the homicide to "being murdered myself;"
- Feeling physically "wounded" deep in their "heart."
- Use of words like "violation," "assault," and "trauma" in relation to self.

Examples of (b):

- Using a variety of terms illustrative of destruction, damage, and ruin.
- Feeling "dead inside." Having a "ruined life."
- "It's like sinking in quicksand, but never quite suffocating and dying oneself."

(iv) Being a "Different Person Now:"

* Survivors frequently noted that, since the murder, they had become

"different people."

Examples:

- Survivors referred to "personality changes"
- Newfound difficulty with concentration and memory.
- Becoming uncharacteristically cautious of others and protective of their children.
- Having different and diminished interests, goals, priorities and involvements since the murder.
- Mood swings emphasizing increased anger (men) and emotional expression (women)

(v) Loss of Control:

Going hand in hand with these other losses is the fifth metaphor: *loss of control*.

Example: "It all began for us when our 19 year old daughter was brutally murdered. From our perspective, we had suddenly lost control of our lives."

- While all of the other metaphors showed a clear majority - often an overwhelming preponderance - of expression by females, the *reverse* was true here, with men emphasizing a sense of personal failure.

(vi) Lost Innocence:

Finally, there is the metaphor of *lost innocence* which underlies radical changes in survivors' sense of reality. This appeared in *several variations*:

(1) Survivors' *shock and incomprehension that such a thing could happen*.

"We lived in a good area. We taught our kids to do unto others. So, I mean, for someone just out of the blue to do something like this for no

reason, is just horrifying."

(2) In relation to the cherished characteristics of the deceased as a person, as in "*the loss of an innocent*," and in relation to the effect of the murder on surviving children where they were characterized as having their "*childhood*" taken from them.

(3) In relation to one's *prior ideals of justice*, which were reinterpreted as being naive under the circumstances.

Example: one man, who, throughout the offender's trial professed his faith that the justice system would see to it that justice was served, immediately collapsed in a "nervous breakdown" when the verdict was read and the offender convicted of a much lesser offence.

(b) Metaphorical Context:

Simply describing survivors' typical metaphors of loss tells us little if we neglect the *social contexts in which they are expressed*.

- It was clear that the *majority* of survivors expressed these metaphors either in response to specific *questions*, as in the interview and survey data, or in the context of certain specific types of *interactions with officials*, as in the Criminal Injuries Compensation data.

- With regard to the former, for example, the vast majority of metaphors were expressed in relation to questions:

Examples: asking respondents *how they would describe losing a loved one in this way*, or *whether they now saw themselves as victims of crime*.

With the Criminal Injuries Compensation data, metaphors were primarily expressed in response to either *requests for documentation*, or *in response to official skepticism or unfavorable rulings*. Indeed, respondents also expressed these metaphors in response to *interactions with the Board that they found inappropriate or unwelcome*.

- Survivors used these metaphors in *two ways*:

(1) To *express the unexpressible*, to convey, inasmuch as possible through the limited medium of language, their pain, loss, and the various meanings disclosed in their lives by same.

(2) When their status as *victims* was questioned, they enunciated these metaphors as a means of *reinforcing this definition of the situation* when something was at stake.

-While there was no pattern linking any *specific* metaphors more or less to *particular* losses (e.g. parental vs. sibling bereavement), it appeared that the metaphors as a group were expressed disproportionately by bereaved parents.

Discussion and Conclusion:

Each of these metaphors constitutes an existential meaning, disclosed in emotion, that sheds light on various, fundamental dimensions of the self. These signify a loss of not only subjects' relationship with the deceased and various integral aspects of their *prior* identities, but express the structure of a *self struggling to make sense of itself* in a world where people get murdered.

These metaphors contribute to the literature as follows:

(1) They systematically *elaborate* the various *dimensions* in which individuals' background assumptions are violated;

(2) The dimensions discussed corroborate, yet empirically elaborate earlier positions on bereavement and loss of self that were either only implicit before, or discussed in a fragmentary fashion;

(3) These emphasize how the existential self, through emotional struggle, *incorporates* present experiences into its evolving reality;

(4) These emphasize gender differences in *substantive expression* which seemed to reflect more general gender differences in this society (e.g. female predominance in all metaphors except loss of control; violent vs. expressive imagery);

(5) By charting the various metaphors together with their variations by gender, it may be possible to map out the "gender schemas" of the bereaved in a way that assists professionals helping the bereaved to target their assistance most effectively;

(6) The *contexts* in which these metaphors were expressed are significant. The disproportionate expression of these by bereaved parents suggests that the impact of loss in parental bereavement may have a more profound impact on the self than other types of loss;

(6) They emphasize how people resort to metaphorical or poetic language to express deep, inner meanings to the self, and contribute to our understanding of the *presentation of self* when something is at stake.

Future research in this area should:

(1) Attempt to comparatively investigate these in other bereavement contexts, such as terminal illness, car accidents, and suicide;

(2) Move beyond questions of loss and the victimized self and focus more squarely on the evolution of *what is left* - for it is out of the assorted wreckage surrounding this gaping hole in their lives that survivors must draw in working through their grief;

(3) Examine the *interactional maintenance vs. reconstruction* of the injured self in the years following the loss.

Whatever the future course of research in these areas, however, this map of the loss of self experienced by homicide survivors should help provide the foundation.

