

Sociology 4099: Victimology

Prof. J.S. Kenney

Overheads Week 4: Social Reactions to Victims of Crime: Victims as Deviants?

This week we will review two interrelated topics:

- (1) Social reactions to victims of crime; and
- (2) Their varying responses.

In doing so, we will cover:

- (1) Recent theoretical and empirical work (Clark; Holman & Silver);
- (2) Details of my research on survivors of murder victims.

(1) Candace Clark: Sympathy Biography and Sympathy Margin

- * Crime victims may either be: (i) considered “sympathy worthy”
(ii) blamed for their plight
- * May be distinguished on “sympathy margin” (i.e. leeway allowed)
- * Involves emotional credits ascribed by others to varying degrees
- * Continually negotiated
- * Closer relationships mean more margin available in “sympathy biography”
- * 4 Rules of “sympathy etiquette”:
 - Don’t make false claims to sympathy (e.g. exaggerating/ crying wolf)
 - Don’t claim too much sympathy (e.g. constantly whining)
 - Claim some sympathy when circumstances appropriate (e.g.

don't brush it off)

- Reciprocate to others for sympathy (e.g. if received in past, provide it)

* "Deviant" sympathizers:

- Underinvest by not recognizing others' rights to sympathy
- Overinvest by giving sympathy to unworthy

* Clark's theory highly relevant to social reactions towards victims

(2) Holman and Silver: Social Responses to Incest:

* Look at long-term impact of child sexual abuse in the family

* Examine *processes* underlying development of problems, including:

Anxiety	Sleep problems
Depression	Dissociative disorders
Low self-esteem	Social isolation
	Sexual difficulties

* Not simply the more severe the abuse, the more severe the problems.
Must look at:

Victims' cognitive processes (e.g. ruminations)
Social responses to victims (e.g. avoidance vs. support)

* This study involved 77 surveys. Findings:

- Only abuse related violence was related to long term distress
- Frequency, duration or invasiveness were not related
- Self-esteem scores were not statistically related to abuse characteristics
- Social integration was most closely related to psychological distress and self-esteem scores

* Ultimately, maintaining social relationships is most closely related to:

- lowering psychological distress
- maintaining self esteem

(3) Victims as Deviants?

(i) The Problem:

- * Labelling theory tends to focus largely on the offender.
- * Implicit concern for the social situation as a whole.
- * This logically includes the victim of crime.

(ii) Literature:

* Taylor, Wood and Lichtman (1983) discuss many labelling concepts in terms of the sympathetic - and not so sympathetic - treatment of victims *as victims*, and their *responses* thereto (e.g. primary and secondary victimization).

* Wortman and Lehman (1983) discuss social responses to victims of life crises. Findings:

- (i) Others often hold *negative feelings* about victims
- (ii) Experience a great deal of *uncertainty* about how to respond
- (iii) Hold a number of *misconceptions* about how victims should react

* Individuals engage in three types of ostensibly supportive behaviors:

- (i) Discouraging open expression
- (ii) Encouraging recovery
- (iii) Falling back on automatic or scripted support attempts

* Victims may feel these ineffective and harmful because:

- (i) They encourage isolation with one's thoughts
- (ii) They dismiss victims' feelings as unimportant
- (iii) They imply the victim should not feel as bad as s/he does

* Research backs this up

- Infant deaths, constrained relationships and intrusive thoughts
- Grieving families losing 90% of friends

(iii) Theoretical Discussion:

* Integrating Clark's work on sympathy, I surmised that *most broadly* crime victims can be reacted to as (a) *victims* or (b) *deviants*.

* The label of *victim* has *three possible trajectories*:

1. Victims may be reacted to as such, ascribed sympathy, and be offered unconstrained, accommodative support.

2. Victims may be reacted to as such, ascribed sympathy, but others respond in ways indicating uncertainty or misconceptions about interaction.

3. Victims may be reacted to as such, initially ascribed sympathy, but others eventually may stigmatize them as "helpless victims" unable to cope.

As for labelling as *deviants*, victims may experience this in two ways:

1. Victims may be reacted to as "emotional deviants" (Thoits, 1990) as the result of their "inappropriate" emotions in a particular social context (e.g. at a party).

2. Victims may be stigmatized as deviants who are blamed for their plight in the first place (e.g. drug dealers who suffer an assault).

* Issues of *sympathy* and *stigmatization* are important matters not only for distinguishing between the labels of *victim and deviant*, but *also between the various responses to victims*.

* This revolves around Clark's concept of "sympathy margin" - the limited amount of sympathy worthiness one is ascribed - which is continually renegotiated, and which may be used up.

* According to Clark, those who follow the "rules of sympathy etiquette" are ascribed more sympathy than those who do not.

* Important to examine the responses or *careers* of those so labelled.

* This may help elaborate a *parallel labelling process* for victims.

(iv) Methodology:

* This study involved the collection, transcription, and analysis of:

- 32 interviews
- 22 surveys
- 108 Criminal Injuries Compensation files

* All involved the experiences of those who had suffered the murder of a loved one

* A major focus was on individuals' helpful and unhelpful social interactions, and on how survivors felt that these had impacted on their experiences, choices, and coping

* These data were analyzed utilizing Q.S.R. NUD*IST over a two year period ending in 1998.

(v) Results:

* I will briefly discuss the results in three parts:

- (a) Extended family and friends;
- (b) Acquaintances, strangers, and the community;
- (c) Subjects' responses.

(a) Extended Family and Friends:

* A *minority* of respondents experienced widespread, *ongoing* support from the majority of their extended family and friends. (Qt)

* Sympathetic, and reportedly “helpful” responses included:

- visiting and staying
- providing ongoing emotional support
- handling responsibilities
- helpful communication (e.g. involving the ability of others to pick up subtle cues regarding when, and how, to offer support.

* Demonstrate how some people may be reacted to as *legitimate victims*, who are *sympathy worthy*.

* A *majority* of respondents, however, experienced:

- (i) A generalized lack of support from the bulk of their extended family and friends;
- (ii) That persisted over time. (3 Qts)

* Reportedly “unhelpful” responses included

- Initial lack of support
- Rapidly disappearing support (e.g. after the funeral)
- “Inappropriate” attention and harassment
- Avoidance by others
- Problems with communication
- Overt conflict.

* Some people considered that these varying responses were the result of their being labeled as *victims*, others as *deviants*

* Survivors' *rationales* for these "unhelpful" responses were instructive in separating these:

(i) Some labelled as *victims* asserted how many of their extended family and friends were afraid to do or say anything that might upset them further, and avoided contact as a result (3 Qts)

(ii) Others labelled as *victims* noted how the initially sympathetic responses of others eventually gave way to others privately urging them to "get on with your lives." (1 Qt)

(iii) Some individuals felt that they were stigmatized as *emotional deviants* by others due to "inappropriate" behavior in public settings. (2 Qts)

(iv) Some individuals were simply stigmatized as *deviants*. These were family members of individuals who were blamed, or somehow seen as contributing to their plight (2 Qts).

* Each of these rationales relate to:

- (i) Sympathy worthiness; and
- (ii) The rules of sympathy etiquette

(b) Acquaintances, Strangers, and the Community:

* Respondents often noted receiving remarkable support from *mere acquaintances* (2 Qts)

* Acquaintances who labeled respondents as victims considered them as legitimately sympathy worthy as above, but their expression of sympathy was not so readily blocked by their own upset and familiarity with respondents.

* Respondents sometimes noted a groundswell of support from *strangers in the community* as well.

* Two factors were associated with such a sympathetic community response:

- (i) Either the deceased, or their survivors, were well known, had much prior community involvement, or both (1 Qt); and
- (ii) Widespread sympathetic media coverage (1 Qt).

Indeed, in a number of such cases, it appeared that *respondents were cast into the role of crusading victim advocates* in such a context (1 Qt).

* In those cases where (i) was absent, sympathy margins were lessened (1Q)

* Where (ii) was absent as well, or the murder involved much negative coverage and/or the proliferation of rumors, there was increased potential for stigmatization (1 Qt).

* Three negative responses occurred as a result:

- (i) Harassment (1 Qt)
- (ii) Blaming (1 Qt)
- (iii) Notoriety (2 Qts)

* Whether the predominant label was deviant or victim, such respondents reported *revictimization* in their encounters with others in the community.

(c) Subjects' Responses:

* Generally, survivors can either:

- (i) Attempt to deal with things on their own; or
- (ii) Seek help.

* Two factors appeared to affect their response in this regard:

- (i) Their *gendered orientation to seeking help*; and

(ii) A variety of *incentives/disincentives*

* With regard to *gender*

-Males were far less likely to seek out help than females
(e.g. imbalance of women in self-help, victims organizations,
and counseling)

* As for *incentives and disincentives*, there were five interrelated components:

- (i) Level of sympathetic support in respondents' social context (4 Qts)
- (ii) Type of encouragement to seek help (2 Qts)
- (iii) Level of stigmatization
- (iv) Additional victimizing encounters;
- (v) Availability of choices.

* All of these patterns were reflected in subjects' *utilization of the victim role*:

(1) Some, particularly those employing the victim role as a defense or reaction to a variety of poor treatment, utilized the victim role *as a shield* to deflect responsibility and account for their failure to cope in a variety of contexts (1 Qt)

(2) Others, who had rejected the negative labels inherent in victimization and replaced it with a positive identity, used the victim role *as a sword* to assign causes, specify remedies, and to generally fight for positive change (1 Qt)

(3) In some circumstances subjects learned to self-presentationally *alternate* between the two as circumstances demanded (*volitional gerrymandering*).

(d) Conclusion:

- * This research elaborates on the range of social responses to victims of crime, and their varying reactions.
- * It takes the labeling process traditionally applied to offenders, and makes many theoretical comparisons in the experiences of victims.
- * It identifies a parallel labeling process for victims, and differentiates between the two on the basis of sympathy, stigma, and a variety of interactional responses.