Sociology 4099: Victimology

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Overheads Week 5:Victim Subcultures:

This week we will review the following interrelated topics:

(1) The organizational structure of victim subcultures;
(2) The impact of support organizations on feelings of deviance/ depression;
(3) The impact of support organizations on victim identity.

(1) Frank J. Weed: The organizational structure of victim subcultures:

* The crime victim movement embraces (1) Political advocacy
                                                                 (2) Social service

* These interrelate symbiotically

* 1990-91 Survey of U.S. crime victim organizations

* Weed outlines six topics emerging from these data, beginning with:

(i) Organizational Features

* Public vs. private distinction:

    Public (e.g. victim/witness programs)
    Private (e.g. crisis centres/shelters)

* Public agencies:

Government money (often at risk)	Detailed internal policies
More bureaucratic	Heavy caseload
Formal procedures	Serve wider interests (CJS)

* Private agencies:

Mixed funding	Porous boundaries
Less bureaucratic	Rely on volunteers/adaptability
Some formal procedures	Serve interest of constituents

(ii) Organizational Shaping of Victim's Problem:

* Concept of victim open to multiple definitions

* Organizations define them to fit pre-existing goals / functions

* Actions taken in response vary on "relevant" aspects of "victim problem"

* Three basic approaches:

(a) Assisting victim as CJS witness
(b) Assisting victim as client suffering psychological harm
(c) Assisting victim to advocate for changes

* Four basic types of service combine these in varying degrees:

(a) Victim/Witness programs
(b) Victim advocacy organizations
(c) Women's centres/ shelters
(d) Rape crisis/ sexual assault agencies

* Survey results coalesce around these four types

(iii) The Perception of a Needy Victim:

* All services are premised on idea of victim's needs requiring outside help:

- Suffering because of acts of offender
- Suffering further because of CJS

* Not seen as:

    -Private problem
    -To be dealt with on own
    (i.e. many victims who don't report crimes)

* Survey results:

    - Support above characterization
    - Contrast with studies showing comparable recovery without services

(iv) Belief Systems of Service Providers:

* Coalesce around broad need of increased status for victims in CJS

* No ready consensus on more specific policies / reforms

(v) Crime Victim Work: A New Occupation:

* Victim service = a new career:

    -Relatively stable funding for professional agencies
    -Socialization to shared knowledge base
    -Shared belief system

* Demographic characteristics (survey):

    - Middle-aged women
    - Middle-class background
    - Average 6.5 years experience
    - 40+ hour week
    -2/3 college graduates
    -37% graduate/professional education
    -Relatively high incidence of prior victimization
    -Claim to direct experience/ moral authority

(vi) Local-National Linkages:

* Local organization's relationship to national umbrella organizations

    - Specialized (MADD; POMC; NCADV)
    - General (NOVA; NVC)

* Survey responses:

    - General umbrella organizations most prominent across board
    - Specialized local organizations linked more to specialized
      national agencies

Conclusion:

* Differences in organization = differences in conceptualization

* Consensus victims needy often self justification

* Victim's rights an ideal, but no consensus on specifics

* Victim services = new career for specific group

* Local-national links vary with organization

(2) Coates and Winston: Counteracting the Deviance of Depression: Peer Support Groups for Victims:

* People under stress want to know if reactions:

    -"Normal" (to be expected)
    -"Deviant"

* Victims can compare reactions to:

    - Friends/ family (often deviant)

- Societal standards (deviant)
- Other victims (rarely encounter)

* Implication of deviance:

  - May transform unhappiness into depression
  - May be mitigated by positive validation of similar victims
  - Need research focus on peer support groups

* Factors potentially affecting victim's experiences:

  - Comfort in sharing feelings vs. usual social niceties
  - Whether feelings validated or seen as different than group
  - Validation stabilizing vs. trading one deviant identity for another

* Limited prior research, so study initiated of 63 sex assault centres:

  - Staff reported 92.5% of groups successful
  - Only 20% reported any participants negatively affected

* Support groups also run by researchers to check feelings of self-deviance:

  - Drop in perceived self-deviance
  - Some reported alleviation of clinical condition
  - Caution that data limited

* Opposite hypothesis: do support groups increase deviance/ depression:

  Factors:

  -Coming to feel sadness/anxiety normal and appropriate
  -Increase in unpleasant feelings
  -Downward spiral

* Prior research limited/ inconsistent

* Groups with professional leaders help overcome depression

* Little evidence at time of downward spiral

* Coates and Winston conclude (on limited evidence):

    -Participation in peer support groups helps victims feel less deviant
    -Participation confers no special advantage in overcoming depression
    -Neither harmful nor particularly helpful to victims
    -Positive effects likely cancelled out by simultaneous negative effects
    -More research needed to better identify positive/negative dynamics

(3) J.S. Kenney: Observations of a Victim Support/Advocacy Group:

* I investigated a victim support group during 1999-2000

* This included observations and interviews involving:

    -12 victims
    -11 support volunteers/ staff

* This group was:

    -Privately run
    -Focused on a particular type of victimization
    -Combined support and advocacy functions
    -Operated largely through volunteers

* Issue: how do encounters impact client's victim identity?

* Group exhibited tension between:

    -Attempts to avoid increasing victim identity
    -Inadvertent ways it was encouraged

* Manifested in variety of ways (i-v)

(i) Training:

- Some volunteers take training to appropriately support victims

- Others not trained, or screened out

- Untrained supporters negating trained ones:

> No boundaries
> Emphasizing "this was my experience, and it will be yours"

(ii) Inconsistent Application of Training:

* Despite training, some support staff:

> -Asked leading questions
> -Made suggestions
> -Used own experiences as examples
> -Distributed pamphlets with implicit victim characterizations
> -Inadvertently encouraged self-fulfilling prophecies

* While claiming that clients "already saw selves as victims," not always so

(iii) Passing Personal Experience/ Inappropriate Advice:

* Two sides to this issue:

* Upside:

> -More personal touch   -Encouraged purpose
> -Understanding/insight   -Facilitated learning to cope/ take control

* Downside:

> -Extensive focus on offender/ crime
> -Focus on negative aspects of own/ other's case

-Other's upset triggering one's own
-Difficultly separating own pain from others
-Well meaning, but inappropriate advice
-Keeping wound open
-People leave/ take away negative experience

(iv) Victim/ Non-Victim Conflict:

* On one hand, dual membership provides "balance"

* On other hand, "hierarchy of victims" encourages conflict

- Status based on victim status
- Encouraged externally and internally
- "Professional victims" (learning experience vs. claim to fame)
- Non-victim members drawn into dynamic ("Victims by association")
- Fought out over leadership positions/ membership/ influence

(v) Victim-Victim Conflict:

* Hierarchy of victims encourages conflict:

- Over status
- Claims of "revictimization" over favoritism in awards of:

Programs
Training
Committee positions
Perks vs. "dirty jobs"

* Classic examples of Holstein and Miller's (1990) "victim contests"

* Such a dynamic does nothing to inhibit the victim identity

Conclusion:

* While attempting to limit encouragement of victim identity, this support group does so in the following ways:

> (1) Training some support volunteers, but not others;
> (2) Inconsistent application of training provided;
> (3) Inappropriate advice/ triggering upset;
> (4) Victim / non-victim conflict;
> (5) Victim/ victim conflict.

* New clients encountering such dynamics may have difficulty avoiding victim identity