

Victimology — A New Territory in Criminology

BY *Inkeri Anttila*

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Abstract:

In 'victim-centred' research, criminality is explored by using information concerning victims of crimes. This research orientation may provide a more balanced outlook as compared with earlier offender-based analysis. One should, however, avoid the pitfall of placing victims in the new role of scapegoats in crime explanation. The dangers of atomistic modes of thinking should be recognized.

A STEADILY GROWING SECTOR of recent research in criminology manifests a concern for investigating the role played by the victims in criminal violations of the law. This kind of research is often regarded as associated with a special *method* for gathering knowledge. The victims are useful because they provide otherwise unavailable information; this information may then be associated with, for example, characteristics of offenders or offences. Victims have for decades been used for such purposes, especially in connection with studies of hidden delinquency. Evidently, this method of research will retain its usefulness even in the future, at least when there are no possibilities of obtaining information from other sources (as in cases where the offender is not caught). Victimological research can thus always be defended on the basis of its general *informational value*.

The concept of victimology is, however, frequently used in a slightly different context. It then refers not only to a particular source of information, but also to the particular type of information as such which is associated with the victim. This type of information could be called '*victim-centred*', and in principle it may be obtained in many different ways, for example, from official statistics, participant observation, or interviews with criminals.

1. SOME ASPECTS OF VICTIM-CENTRED RESEARCH

What new perspectives are brought into criminology by victim-centred research? .

1. Criminologists who focus on characteristics of the individual have obtained a new set of research targets. For decades, the offenders had been in the focus of interest, and much work had been spent on efforts to find out what

kind of peculiarities, anomalies, mental illnesses, intelligence or character defects could serve as an explanation of criminality. Now, the same types of questions may be raised with regard to the victims. The scope of individual-centred research was thus enlarged 100 per cent, or even more.

2. Victim-centred research has brought a kind of balance to criminological research. Society has always tried to assign the offender a certain societal role and to keep him in it. This stereotyping of the offender has been effected by looking at him as an outsider, a different kind of person: evil, sick, mentally deviant. The stereotyped victim, on the contrary, has been seen as the innocent party whose miserable fate it was to fall victim to a brutal crime. The new perspective introduced by victimology has, of course, eliminated these stereotypes. In some instances the balance may even have swung too far in the other direction.

New scapegoats are available for explaining criminality. Criminologists have been quick to point out that victims of assault have no one except themselves to blame if they deliberately walk in dark alleys after dark; that young girls actually wanted to be raped if they did not heed the warnings of their mothers; and that the stores deliberately provoke thefts by exhibiting goods in as tempting a way as possible.

Generally, one can say that the earlier stereotypes of 'black and white' have been exchanged for 'grey versus grey'. It is often pointed out that a great part of criminality is concentrated within certain groups and certain areas. Both criminals and victims appear to be odd people, inclined to unlawfulness, provocative and easily provoked. The same individuals may alternately or even simultaneously turn up as offenders and victims, while the majority of society's ordinary members are safely outside.

3. This reorientation — deliberately exaggerated here — has also influenced policy-making. In earlier times, the emphasis was on deterrence designed to influence the motivation of potential criminals: the threat of punishment and the risk of getting caught were considered the primary means of preventing crime. Victim-centred research has pointed to new alternatives. Once the stereotype of the innocent and unsuspecting victim has proved to be false, it has seemed natural to plan measures that are supposed to change the behaviour of the victims, rather than that of the offenders. It has become possible to demand that potential victims should use special safety locks, introduce television surveillance in shops and similar technical devices, or insure themselves against burglaries, etc. Speaking the language of criminology: a part of the social costs caused by crime has been transferred from the offenders to potential victims. This new ideology has even brought forth suggestions that the entire costs of criminality could in some cases be placed on the shoulders of the victim: in Scandinavian countries it has been proposed that the owner of a supermarket should not have the right to prosecute the offender in cases of petty shoplifting; and it has been suggested that the banks should themselves accept

the responsibility for forged cheques. It has been said that the costs of petty offences connected with any particular business could easily be paid by those who profit from that business.

4. Another new perspective in the field of criminal policy is connected with determining the gravity of various offences. The general sense of justice, often mentioned as a yardstick, primarily reflects the opinions of the middle class, while the victims who suffer the damage tend to belong to the lower class. Victim-centred research has indicated that the victim's opinions concerning the gravity of an offence might differ from the opinions of the middle class. If the idea of 'relative loss' is considered, i.e. relative to the life situation of the victim in question, it is definitely necessary to ask the victim himself how he feels. The development of systems for the compensation of victims of crime may well have been influenced by victimological research.

2. THE LIMITS AND RISKS OF VICTIM-CENTRED RESEARCH

Without any doubt, victim-centred research will continue to be an essential part of criminology. A word of caution may therefore be in order. There are not only advantages but also some limits to be taken into consideration.

1. A real danger is the possibility that interest will simply shift from the individual offender to the individual victim. Research preoccupied with individual characteristics can usually only be effectively used for explaining the *selection process* i.e. what kind of individuals will be selected as criminals or victims. Variations in the level of criminality remain without explanation. Individual-centred research in its narrowest sense takes into account offender and victim independently. More sophisticated research also considers the interaction process and the general situational factors. But even then, if the problems related to society in general and to the volume of criminality are left aside, the research results tend to be of little importance for decision-making.

2. The growing interest in victim-centred research may lead to over-emphasis on such types of criminal behaviour where there is an easily identified individual victim. This implies a concentration of research efforts on traditional types of crimes, such as assaults, larcenies, and sexual offences. Some large groups of crimes seem to be neglected altogether, only because there are no easily identified victims.

The problem of finding a victim depends, as a matter of fact, upon how we view the functioning of the control system. In an abstract sense, every crime has a potential victim. The immediate crime target will, perhaps, not consider himself or herself victimized at all (e.g. when a sex crime against a minor takes place with the victim's consent). The criminalization may then frequently be interpreted so that the real 'victims' are all those persons who feel that the crime violates their taboos or threatens their security. Even the 'crimes without

victims', if the popular term is used, have victims: they may, for example, be supposed to cause danger in a society.

The analysis of the victim concept could be taken one step further by viewing the whole society as a victim. Or one could, in a certain sense, consider the criminals as victims. According to the ideology which stresses the unavoidability of crime in any society, there must always be criminals. They are needed for the purpose of indicating the limits of the specific norms. Criminals, the scapegoats of a society, thus help others to remain law-abiding citizens.

These observations may, I hope, help us to see the limits of victim-centred research. I have, in particular, wanted to point to the dangers of an atomistic mode of thinking, where sometimes only the offenders, sometimes only the victims are the main targets of interest.

It is important to encourage and develop victim-centred research. Let us hope that these efforts will not prevent us from seeing the crime problem in its entirety and in all its complexity.

The Author

INKERI ANTILA is a Doctor of Law and Licenciante of Political Sciences (Sociology). She is Professor of Criminal Law at the University of Helsinki, Director of the Institute of Criminology (Ministry of Justice), Chairman of the Scandinavian Research Council for Criminology, and Vice-chairman of the United Nation's Committee for Crime Prevention and Control. She belongs to the board of directors of the International Association of Penal Law and to the scientific committee of the International Society for Criminology, and she is Vice-Chairman of the International Penal and Penitentiary Foundation. Her last book — with PATRIK TÖRNUDD as co-author — is a general introduction to criminology (*Kriminologi i kriminalpolitiskt Perspektiv*, Stockholm 1973).

Author's address: *Mannerheimintie 79 A 12, 00270 Helsinki 27, Finland.*