

# Introducing Victimology

by

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The Ninth International Symposium of the World Society of Victimology took place at the Free University of Amsterdam from August 25 to 29, 1997. It had as its main theme "Caring for Victims: The Role of the Community and the Professions." This introduction gives a brief outline of the history of victimology. This is followed by a description of "the state of the art" of victimology as apparent in the scientific program of the symposium.

## VICTIMOLOGY, FIFTY YEARS ON

### Penal Victimology

Victimology, or the study of victimization, is a field of scientific endeavor that took off as a separate discipline around 1970 (Drapkin and Viano, 1974). Before that, victimology was, *inter alia*, pioneered by the German criminologist von Hentig and the Rumanian, later Israeli, criminal law scholar Mendelsohn (1998).

In 1941 von Hentig published an article entitled "Remarks on the Interaction of Perpetrator and Victim." Later he published *The Criminal and His Victim*, a criminological textbook in which he devoted a chapter to the victim (von Hentig, 1948). von Hentig treated the victim as one of the participants in a crime. Victims were classified according to the nature of their involvement in the criminal act. It was thought that a study of the victim's role might result in better prevention of crime.

In 1947, Mendelsohn presented a paper in French at a congress in Bucharest, Rumania, in which he coined the term "victimology" (see Hoffman, 1992). Like von Hentig, he drew attention to the part played by victims in precipitating crimes of violence, for example, through provocation. For Mendelsohn, a defense counsel, victim precipitation was a mitigating circumstance in meting out punishment for the offender.

Of great significance to the development of victimology as a field of research in its own right was Schafer's 1968 book *The Victim and His Criminal: A Study into Functional Responsibility*. As the title, which paraphrases the title of

von Hentig's classic textbook, indicates, the victim is at the heart of this monograph. Schafer presents victimology as the independent study of the relationships and interactions between offender and victim before, during and after the crime. In addition to victim precipitation in the events resulting in the criminal act, the obligation of the offender to make good by compensating his victim is now also seen as part of the subject matter. This view was shared by the Dutch criminologist Nagel in his publications on the "victimological notion" in criminology (Nagel, 1959; 1963). Like the other pioneers, Nagel argued for an interactionist victimology. He was particularly interested in the relationship between offender and victim after the commission of the crime. In Nagel's opinion, the criminal justice system should aim to satisfy the offender's need for atonement, the victims need for retribution and their joint need for reconciliation.

Fattah, a Canadian criminologist who published a book entitled *La Victime: est-elle coupable? (Is The Victim to Blame?)* in 1971 (see also Fattah, 1986; 1992) — was a speaker at the Amsterdam symposium — can also be regarded as belonging to the first generation of penal victimologists.

These pioneering authors were all criminal lawyers and/or criminologists. Their field of interest was the victim as key figure in the social processes resulting in and following from criminal acts. Attempts at studying the role of victims as co-precipitators of the crime continued in the empirical studies of Wolfgang (1958), and later in Amir's (1971) research on rape. The key notion here is "victim precipitation" as a neutral, non-legal concept that can help to explain the occurrence of criminal acts.

The interests of these first victimologists continue to form one of the main streams within victimology today. This stream has been called penal victimology, in contrast to general victimology, which we will introduce hereafter. For the adherents of penal victimology, the scope of the field is defined by the criminal law: *victimology is the study of the victims of incidents defined as criminal by law.* The research agenda of this victimological stream combines issues concerning the causation of crimes with those relating to the victim's role in the criminal proceedings. Penal victimology looks at the dynamic interplay between victim and offender. An appropriate alternative name for this stream would be *interactionist victimology.*

### **Blaming the Victim**

The most important political criticism leveled against penal victimology is that it provides arguments for blaming victims for their fate. From a historical perspective, it cannot be denied that Mendelsohn (1956) in his early publications draws the attention to the victim's involvement, with the intention to defend the offender and shift part of the blame to the victim.<sup>2</sup> In later victimological publications by Mendelsohn and others, the involvement of the victim in the commis-

sion of the crime is analyzed to explain the dynamics of criminal behavior without any intent to inculcate the victim. It cannot be denied, however, that the victimological notion of victim precipitation can be exploited by others for the purpose of victim blaming. This criticism against victimology was voiced most clearly by feminist researchers, for example, in reviews of Amir's (1971) study of victim precipitation in rape. In relation to violence against women, the issue of victim precipitation is particularly sensitive. The notion that victims, by their provocative behavior, trigger their victimization by male victimizers — and in fact deserve to be victimized — is part of the patriarchal mindset that is at the root of many such crimes. By focusing on the victim's involvement, attention is diverted from the structural causes of violence against women.

Researchers who study the role played by the victim in the dynamics resulting in the crime as well as in the ensuing legal conflict, will typically hold discriminant opinions on the punishment of the offender. In some cases the victim might indeed have to share part of the blame. In other cases, the victim has an interest in being reconciled with the offender. In penal victimology there is an intrinsic interest in non-punitive solutions to criminal incidents (such as mediation), which, at least in theory, empower both victims and offenders. For the pioneers in victimology, offenders and victims are equally deserving of humanitarian concerns. Since concern for the offenders does not conflict with concern for the victim, there is every reason to preserve this tradition. This even-handedness is perhaps less justified, though, with regard to crimes committed in the context of structural power inequalities. Researchers who come to victimology from a gender-equality perspective have made mainstream victimologists more sensitive to power inequalities in general and to gender issues in particular (Elias, 1985).

In one important respect, the new generation of victimologists' focusing on gender issues seems to be in full agreement with the pioneers of penal victimology. According to both, victims must not be studied in purely medical terms. Criminal victimization is not a clinical phenomenon. The key to a better understanding of the problems of crime victims is the recognition that they have been wronged by another human being and that their shattered sense of justice must be repaired. Victims must not only be given therapeutic help, they must also be rendered justice.

### **General Victimology**

The second main stream of victimology is usually called general victimology. Like penal victimology, this stream was also first explicitly described by Mendelsohn. In one of his later postwar publications, Mendelsohn (1956) advocated a general study of what he now called "victimity," with a view to reducing it by prevention and victim assistance. In later papers he called for the establishment of victims' clinics, with assistance based on a specific personal, social

and cultural rehabilitation theory. Mendelsohn's interest no longer lay with crime and its prevention, but with the prevention and alleviation of victimity in a wide sense. Mendelsohn believed that the subjects of study should include not only victims of crime and abuse of power but also those of accidents, natural disasters and other acts of God. He advocated the development of general victimology as a discipline in its own right, independent of criminology or criminal law, which would assist governments in minimizing human suffering. This new definition of victimology must of course be understood against the background of the human rights abuses during the Second World War, of which Mendelsohn himself was a victim.

Although Mendelsohn (1956) was never involved in setting up practical-care facilities for victims, he may nevertheless be regarded as the spiritual father of what is now known as the victims' movement. In almost all developed and many developing nations, provisions for victim assistance have mushroomed since the 1970s (Maguire and Corbett, 1987; Roberts, 1990). Additionally, in many countries criminal procedural law has been modified as to give crime victims a better deal (Joutsen, 1987). Victimologists have become victim advocates, with victimology transformed from a victimology of the act into a victimology of action. Parallel to this global reform movement, clinical research involving victims of crimes and disasters has expanded over the past 20 years. The key issue in this field of research is how people can be assisted in coping with traumatic stress, or how posttraumatic stress disorder can be prevented or cured (Kleber and Brom, 1992). Although criminologists, criminal lawyers and social psychologists have made important contributions to this practical body of knowledge, most work in this field was and is done by psychiatrists and clinical psychologists. The international forum for such research is the International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies, in which psychiatrists and clinical psychologists exchange research findings and insights.

The scope of this type of study is not limited to victims of crimes. The precise nature of the serious life events that generate traumatic stress is of little importance. Rather, the focus is on treatment and the prevention or alleviation of adverse consequences. Much research has been done on the problems of survivors of the Holocaust and other acts of war, and on the best methods to assist them in their coping behavior. Posttraumatic stress disorders have also been observed among victims of accidents or natural disasters. Many victim assistance programs also provide services for victims of traffic accidents or natural disasters. It is for this reason that the stream of victimology focusing on victim assistance is often called general victimology. This stream differs not only in its definition of the scope of victimology, but also in its focus on assistance or treatment rather than on the analysis of the genesis of the victimization. A fitting slogan for this stream of victimology would be that victimology should not seek to interpret

victims but to help them. An alternative name would be *assistance-oriented victimology*.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Culture of Complaint**

General victimology has also attracted political criticism. It is said that the status of victim is too readily claimed by persons suffering from minor problems, and that this status undermines personal responsibility. The U.S. in particular is said to be in the grips of “the culture of complaint” (Hughes, 1993). In this context, mention is also made of the “culture of therapeutics” and “the victimization industry.” Considering the seriousness of the victimizations at issue in the victimological discourse, this criticism is far off the mark. However, a critical stance toward possible excesses of “applied victimology” must, of course, be welcomed at all times. In many countries, general victimology is institutionally linked to victim advocacy and service delivery. Now that specialized victim services are delivered by fully fledged organizations in many developed countries, there are vested professional interests at stake. Critical evaluation studies by independent researchers are of vital importance for the upgrading of services. Victimologists who come from a penal perspective do not necessarily share the assumptions of the helping professions and can usefully raise “naive” questions concerning the theoretical foundations and effectiveness of the assistance given. They can also help to counterbalance exaggerated claims of victim status by special-interest groups.

In some clinical studies of crime victims, the criminal nature of the victim’s problems is largely ignored. Instead, the focus is on the clinical symptoms of the patient. Criminal lawyers sometimes welcome a medical approach to victims. If the problems of crime victims can be satisfactorily addressed by the caring professions, the criminal justice system does not have to bother and can occupy itself exclusively with the relationship between state and offender. In that case there is no pressing need to change existing criminal procedures. Again, penal victimologists — in concert with feminist victimologists — can act as a useful counterforce against such professional coalitions that are not in the best interests of victims.

### **Offender Bashing**

A better deal for crime victims can easily be reconciled with a humane and fair treatment of suspects or offenders. In practice, however, the victim’s movement in some countries has been hijacked by political groups who advocate more severe punishment of offenders. It is often argued — although never unequivocally proven — that many crime victims are gratified by the meting out of harsh punishment. If punishment is seen as relevant for the recovery of the victim, a

one-sided focus on the victim can provide intellectual ammunition for a harsh, retributive attitude toward offenders. Unlike penal or interactionist victimology, which by definition looks at the actions and interests of both parties, assisted-oriented victimology can be exploited for the purpose of "offender bashing." Victimology as a field of study must be wary of political manipulation.

### THE WORLD SOCIETY OF VICTIMOLOGY

From 1970 onward, the global development of victimology as a discipline or field of research,<sup>4</sup> has been closely interrelated with the activities of the WSV, the World Society of Victimology. The WSV was formally founded in Münster, Germany, by criminologists such as Schneider and Drapkin *inter alia* in 1979.<sup>5</sup> The first of the series of international symposia, held every three years, was conducted in Jerusalem as far back as 1973: the symposium held in Amsterdam was the ninth. Viano, an American criminologist, also organized a number of symposia in this same period and began publishing the journal *Victimology* in 1976. The journal *International Review of Victimology*, established in 1988, is affiliated with the WSV, which also issues a regular newsletter.

Victimology, as institutionalized by the WSV, may be defined as: "the scientific study of the extent, nature and causes of criminal victimization, its consequences for the persons involved and the reactions thereto by society, in particular, the police and the criminal justice system as well as voluntary workers and professional helpers." This definition encompasses both penal or interactionist, and general or assistance-oriented, victimology. It is perhaps worth remembering that the Dutch criminologist Nagel had reservations about the establishment of an independent victimological society. He felt that the study of victims should remain a "notion in criminology." Mendelsohn, at the other extreme, argued eloquently in Münster for a general, multidisciplinary victimology and for a political platform to reduce human suffering. At the symposia of the WSV, the debate on the objectives, scope and subject matter of victimology has continued. At the third and fourth symposia, the criminologist Cressey (1988), for example, argued for a clear distinction between scientific and humanistic victimology.

Over the years, a tacit agreement was reached on the relationship between victimology as an academic undertaking and the service-, action- or policy-oriented victims' movement. While the WSV is a society for the advancement of specialized scientific research — and should be cautious in taking positions in political debates — it is fully recognized that much victimological research has significant implications for the provision of services to victims, and that the research is carried out partly for that reason. The WSV has been instrumental in the development and subsequent adoption of the Declaration on the Basic Prin-

ciples of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power of the United Nations (U.N.). The society is also actively involved in follow-up activities regarding this declaration, such as the publication of a Guide for Policymakers and a Handbook for Practitioners.<sup>6</sup> The conference theme in Amsterdam, "Caring for Victims: The Role of the Community and the Professions," also bore witness to this commitment. Even more than current main stream criminology, victimology is an action- or policy-oriented field of study. Many of the leading researchers in the field are or have been involved in promoting or setting up victim assistance organizations. At the same time, many of those working in these organizations have a scientific background and a keen interest in objective information on the effectiveness of their services. Several officials of victim assistance organizations present keynote lectures or papers on developments within these organizations, which are interesting from a scientific viewpoint as well. Within the WSV, the cross-fertilization of theory and policy making and service delivery is generally seen as positive, and this feature probably helps to explain the popularity of victimology among students.

Another traditional bone of contention is whether victimology should confine itself to criminal victimization in the formal sense or accept the wider definitions of general victimology and encompass the victims of human rights abuses, accidents, and disasters. The political scientist R. Elias (1985) and others in the past have often argued that victimology should not define its subject matter in terms of criminal law but in terms of human rights. According to this view, victimology should be the study of the human consequences of human rights abuses, committed by either citizens or governments. Šeparovic (1985) has argued that victimology should extend its definitions to include victims of human rights abuses. According to him, victims of natural disasters must not be included because their victimizations are determined by a variety of natural forces outside man's will. Although some assistance organizations also offer services to victims of natural disasters, Šeparovic's opinion seems, at least for the moment, to prevail within the WSV. At the symposium in Amsterdam, victims of natural disasters received scant attention. The definition of general victimology is generally seen as too wide for scientific purposes. Human rights abuses, however, are now definitely considered a central issue in victimology. In fact, a full day had even been set aside in Amsterdam for the victims of abuses of power, and there were more than 30 papers dealing with this topic. The U.N. General Assembly's 1987 Declaration on the Basic Principles of Justice for Victims and Crime and Abuse of Power has been accepted by the WSV as a frame of reference. The subject matter of victimology can be defined in terms of the U.N. declaration: "Victims mean persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or sub-

stantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws, including those proscribing abuse of power.”

This definition of the victim is relatively open. The scope of the subject matter of victimology will become wider if, in a movement that seems likely, more forms of violence and abuse of power are covered by national or international criminal legislation and/or jurisprudence.

### **The Amsterdam Symposium and Beyond**

The Amsterdam symposium attracted 640 participants, representing 67 countries. A total of 254 papers was presented. The scientific program of the symposium consisted of four parts. On the first day keynote lectures and papers were delivered about measuring and assessing victimization through survey research. Victimization surveys, carried out locally or nationally among the general public or special groups, have for some time been the backbone of empirical, quantitative victimology. The second day was largely devoted to victims' bill of rights and the more general issue of victim policy. As was to be expected, conflicting opinions were expressed about, for example, the proper role of crime victims in criminal procedure (Sebba, 1996). The topic of the third day was issues and trends in victim support. In this section too, the achievements of the victims' movement were evaluated from diverging and sometimes opposing perspectives. Finally, on the fourth day the victims of abuse of power and war crimes were the main focus.

With this ninth symposium, victimology has proved its vitality. It gained much from the input by researchers from developing countries and countries in transition. In these countries, assistance-oriented victimology is still in the pioneering stage. The challenges facing an emerging victim movement in a free-market environment where state-based provisions are limited are daunting. There is an acute need for the exchange of information on best practice in low-budget service delivery. There is ample scope for technical co-operation and cross-cultural action research. The knowledge of general or assistance-oriented victimology is much in demand. Studies on gender issues may give certain Western researchers a feeling of *déjà vu*. But these issues have not previously been broached by criminologists in developing countries and the former communist countries. In the context of these countries these issues have acquired a new urgency. At the same time, a new wave of perhaps more rigorous empirical studies of gender issues is also in evidence in many developed nations. Violence against women and girls in all its manifest and hidden forms is likely to remain a victimological priority around the world for many more years.

According to many participants, among the theoretically most interesting papers at the symposium were those on repeat victimization (Skogan and Winkel, respectively, this volume). There is a rapidly growing body of knowl-



edge about the phenomenon that a relatively small section of the public is disproportionately often victimized by crime. The criminological insight that a small group of career criminals is involved in a significant portion of total crime has thus found its victimological counterpart. Victim proneness, which has been almost a taboo subject for two decades, has thus been placed on the victimological research agenda again. The highly contentious concept of victim precipitation has also returned. Homicides by female perpetrators are now analyzed by feminist researchers as responses to long-term abuse at the hands of the perpetrators' intimates. Victim advocates use these insights as an argument to defend the female offenders. In some respects, victimology has come full circle.

As previously mentioned, a full day of the symposium was reserved for the study of human rights abuses. Keynotes were delivered on human rights abuses in South Africa, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Latin America. Interestingly, some of the classical issues of penal victimology — such as the need for atonement, retribution and reconciliation of the parties involved — have come back on the victimological agenda in relation to human rights abuses. Penal or interactionist victimology seems set to enter a new period of bloom as well.

The trends that manifested themselves in Amsterdam may well signal the beginning of a new victimology based on the marriage between elements of penal, interactionist victimology and of general, victim-assistance victimology. The breaking away of victimology from criminology as a semi-independent field of research has been fraught with risks. Developments so far seem to have justified the creation of a separate organization for victimological research. Victimology has proven to be a fruitful intellectual rendezvous for researchers coming from different disciplines and theoretical schools.



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NOTES

1. Professor of criminology at the University of Leiden, Leiden, The Netherlands, and, since August 1997, President of the World Society of Victimology.

2. In the early days of his career Mendelsohn was influenced by Sigmund Freud, with whom he corresponded about criminological issues (Hoffman, 1992). Mendelsohn might well have been affected by the Freudian notion that victims unwittingly seek their victimization as a means of abating feelings of guilt over sexual feelings.

3. To underline the difference with penal victimology, I coined the term "victimagogics" for assistance-oriented victimology (a combination of the Latin word *victima* and the Greek verb for assistance — *agogein* — also used in the term pedagogics) [van Dijk, 1985]. In line with this, trained victim support professionals could be called *victimagogues* instead of victimologists.

4. Each country has its own history of victimological ideas (see Rock, 1988). A milestone in the development of victimology in the Netherlands was a congress organized by the University of Nijmegen in 1971 entitled *Slachtoffers van delicten* ("Victims of Crime"). The main topic debated at this congress was whether it was appropriate to establish victim support provisions. An important argument in favor of this was that such schemes would increase the support among society for a humane treatment of offenders. In this light, the advisory commission on Punishment for Crimes against Property, of which the criminologist Hulsman was one of the leading members, recommended that a generous relief fund for all victims of criminal offenses be created. The commission argued that compensating the victim would pave the way for a non-retributive, care-oriented approach to treating offenders. The recommendation was not adopted by the government. Instead, it was decided that a (rather scanty) relief fund for victims of serious violent crimes be set up in 1976.

As a sequel to this congress, some criminological institutes had meanwhile started empirical research involving victims of crime (van Dijk and Fiselier, 1974). These studies were still in line with the interactionist stream of Nagel et al. One of the central questions, for example, was whether the retributive needs of victims were influenced by the part they themselves played in precipitating the crime. In the Netherlands, clinical victimology became known chiefly through the work of Bastiaans, a professor of psychiatry at Leiden University who treated victims of the Holocaust. The interest of psychiatrists in victimisation was fanned in part by several serious cases of train-hijacking involving dozens of victims. After 1980, the provision of care to victims and their legal status became the focus of victimological research by Dutch criminologists as well. Assistance-oriented victimology then became the dominant stream in the Netherlands for a long time. Researchers such as Groenhuijsen, van Dijk and Winkel were closely involved in the development of provisions for crime victims and of a more respectful approach to victims by police and the criminal justice system. A great deal of victimological policy research was carried out in that period by the Research and Documentation Centre of the Netherlands Ministry of Justice. In the early seventies, under the auspices of the RDC, a start was also made on annual, country-wide crime-victims surveys. With the benefit of

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hindsight, the 1989 collection of essays by J. Soetenhorst-de Savornin Lohman entitled *Slachtoffer van Misdrijven* ("Victim of Crime") may be regarded as closing off this period of victimologic activities. In the 1990s, victimological studies figured in the research programs of a large number of criminological and criminal law departments at universities (Wemmers, 1996). The new wave of victimological studies focuses less on policy and more on theory formation.

5. The German criminologists Schneider and Kirchhoff played a leading role in founding the WSV. The aged Mendelsohn also attended the founding meeting. van Dijk, by reference to the views of Nagel, expressed his doubts on the appropriateness of a separate organization.

6. Both documents will shortly be published by the U.N.'s Centre of International Crime Prevention, located in Vienna, Austria.