

What's in a word? Victims on 'Victim'

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Title: What's in a word? Victims on 'Victim'

Abstract:

Identifying as a victim of crime is a complex process involving both social and personal motivations. This paper utilises data gathered from victims of crime to examine how their thoughts, feelings and reactions to the victim label are influenced by societal stigma, and how this influence is mediated by personal beliefs and cognition processes. It does this firstly by examining participants' thoughts and reactions to the word 'victim,' where findings indicate a distinct disconnect between how an incident of crime is labelled and how a victim identifies themselves, suggesting an acknowledgement of the incident as wrong and illegal, but denial of victimhood. Secondly, key themes considered by participants to be characteristic of victimhood are identified. These include weakness as a core characteristic of victims, the fluidity of the state of victimhood, and the importance of effective coping versus suffering.

Keywords: victims, identity, labelling, stigma

Introduction

When presenting research at conferences or on occasion when teaching students there is an exercise I like to do in order to demonstrate the stigma of the word 'victim' in our modern western society. The exercise is simple: go online, find a definition and/or list of synonyms to the word 'victim'. The results are not particularly surprising, but very telling;

examples include casualty, sufferer, fatality, scapegoat and sacrifice, prey, hunted and quarry; to name but a few. This simple exercise is a powerful example of the negative connotations the word conjures, and in turn, why one might be powerfully motivated to avoid being labelled in this manner.

Moving from synonyms to definitions, despite debate in the wider academic community (see Hope, 2007), the World Society of Victimology still defines victims as

‘persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, or economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws, including those proscribing abuses of power’

What stands out about this definition is just how very neutral sounding it is in comparison to the example above. So where then do the negative connotations come from? Common dictionary definitions begin to introduce more negative definitions such as *‘a person who is tricked or duped’* and *‘a person who has come to feel helpless and passive in the face of misfortune or ill-treatment’* (Oxford English Dictionary, 2017), but this still falls short of the near ubiquitous negative stereotype. Worldwide victims are looked upon with displeasure and scorn. Whereas in modern Western society victims may face ridicule and stigmatization, elsewhere they may face prosecution, ostracisation, or even a violent death (see for example the case of Aisha Ibrahim Duhulow). In these extreme scenarios it is obvious why victims may not come forward and conceal or disassociate from a victim

identity as it may help to secure their survival, but why is this still necessary in a country that continually espouses the rights and services offered to victims?

Background & previous research

The power placed in labels will be well known to anyone who has studied or researched in sociology or criminology, though the association is typically one made with young offenders and youth justice. Very little research exists, excluding perhaps Kenney (2002) and Greenberg and Ruback (1993), investigating the role labelling plays in the plight of crime victims. Proponents of the use of ‘survivor’ as a descriptor go some way in highlighting the undesirable and negative characteristics of the word, but rarely if ever, cite empirical evidence in support of the claim. In contrast, Taylor et al., (1983) began to identify some of the reasons, both social and personal, that make the victim label undesirable.

Socially, the word is associated with a powerful stigma and may draw blame, derogation, weakness and shame. As the origins of the word ‘victim’ are telling (from the Latin for sacrifice), so too are those for stigma. Originating in Greek, the word stigma was used to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the bearer; the term stigma then was used to refer to an attribute that was deeply discrediting (Goffman, 1963). Hence, once this stigma is attached in the form of the

victim label, any hope of a rapid recovery or, in fact, of any recovery at all is dashed (Van Dijk, 2009). This in turn is due to the phase of the socialization process through which the stigmatised person (the victim) learns and incorporates the standpoint of the unstigmatised other, acquiring thereby the identity beliefs of wider society (Goffman, 1963, p45).

According to Goffman, the beliefs of wider society are that the person with the stigma is not quite human (a very dangerous process of dehumanisation, as history has taught us time and time again). Based on this assumption society exercises a variety of discriminations towards the stigmatised victim through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce their life chances and prospects of recovery (1963, p.15). This is done through the construction of a 'stigma theory', an ideology to explain the inferiority and account for the danger the victim represents.

What danger does the stigmatised victim convey to the untainted individual? According to a number of psychological theories, any healthy individual will possess a series of beliefs, schema or an 'internal working model' on which the person relies to construct a basic theory of self, other and the world (Bowlby, 1973). It is through this system of beliefs that we interact with the outside world and make sense of our daily experiences. The exact nature or content of these beliefs is debatable, but the literature tends to suggest at least three core beliefs to which most individuals subscribe (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Simply put, these are the belief in personal invulnerability, that the self is good, and that the world is safe and just (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Frieze et al., 1987).

It is the challenging of the belief systems that also makes being a victim of crime so distressing (from a psychological perspective). Victimisation invalidates, or in the words of Janoff-Bulman (1992), 'shatters' the assumptive world on which we rely as our taken for granted sense of security, predictability, trust, and optimism are profoundly and perhaps permanently undercut by the traumatic experience (Neimeyer et al., 2002).

Any challenge to these beliefs is therefore upsetting, and may result in distress. Therefore, when another person, particularly someone who is similar to oneself, is victimised for no apparent reason, this challenges the beliefs that the world is just and safe, thereby threatening to our belief systems. It is this same logic that results in blaming the victim for their suffering, as this allows the safeguarding of belief systems. By blaming the victim for their fate, we can assure ourselves that we live in a Just World (Lerner, 1980).

Recovering from crime then may be seen as an attempt to rebuild these foundational beliefs, which will necessarily involve integrating the traumatising event into one's world view. Recovering individuals can be viewed as struggling to affirm or reconstruct a personal world of meaning that has been challenged, however threats to beliefs systems that are traumatic in nature such as criminal victimisation, pose additional challenges to

the survivor's adaptation. Trauma of any sort then requires a 'relearning of the self and the world' in the wake of loss (Attig, 1996 p239).

In their research on mourning and meaning Neimeyer et al., (2002) discuss a framework for recovery which also fits that of victims recovering from the loss of self following criminal victimisation. They suggest humans seek meaning in mourning and do so by struggling to construct a coherent account of their loss, or in our case victimisation, that preserves a sense of continuity with who they have been while also integrating the reality of a changed world into their conception of who they must now be. However, adapting to normative as well as traumatic losses poses significant challenges to survivors, who draw on personal, social, and cultural resources to give meaning to the loss and to incorporate the experience into their ongoing narrative. One implication of this view is that the meaning making triggered by victimisation is not a private affair but pursued at the juncture of self and society rather than only in the private thoughts and feelings of the harmed individual. (p522, cited in Armour, 2007). This is problematic from the outset as we have seen the view society takes towards the victim, which unfortunately results in people suffering from either loss or victimisation receiving little or no support from the community (Doka, 2002; Neimeyer and Jordan, 2002). The ability to make meaning may therefore be dependent on a supportive and validating social milieu and may be thwarted by their stigmatised social status and the meanings assigned by others.

The meaning and role of victims prescribed by others is generally one of the weak, passive and fragile victim. The little old lady of Christie's (1986) ideal is well known to us all. What is also known however is that this image rarely reflects the reality (See Fohring, forthcoming). Victims are more often young than old, more often male than female (excluding victims of sexual offences), and more often known to the offender (Scottish Government, 2006). What's more, victims may be stronger and more independent than they are often given credit for. This poses a further problem as these attributes do not sync with the public views of victims, and according to Ditton (1999) and Goodey (2005) a fearful, passive victim in need of help is a more convenient person for support agencies and government alike to manage than an angry one, actively seeking punishment of the offender or changes in society (cited in Van Dijk, 2009).

Two powerful motivations to avoid being labelled as a victim thereby present themselves to those affected by crime, both originating in our foundational belief systems. Firstly, we have an overwhelmingly negative public perception of victimised individuals, one that victims are keenly aware of. Second, we have the victim's own internal beliefs about self and world which are already facing a direct challenge and are in need of protection. With such powerful motivations, it is not surprising that many victims choose to avoid the label (Fohring, 2015).

Design

Data for this study was collected via voluntary in depth semi-structured interviews with 45 victims of crime from across Scotland and northern England. Incidents did not necessarily take place in Britain, although only two respondents reported either incidents or consequences of crime occurring out with the country. Data reported in this paper was collected as part of a larger study examining the experiences of victims and factors affecting interaction with criminal justice systems. In particular, the quotations reported here were responses to questions such as ‘do you/did you consider what happened to you a crime?’. ‘do you/did you consider yourself to be a victim?’, and how does that word (victim) make you feel?’ The structure of the interview generally followed the pattern of describing the incident or incidents, the impact it had on the victim, reporting and the criminal justice system, coping and recovery. Following this, the interview would vary depending on individual experiences.

In order to recruit participants who had not reported their victimisation to the police, a wide variety of methods were employed in reaching potential participants. Firstly, participants were recruited to the study through a number of local agencies, including Scottish Government (SG), Victim Support Scotland (VSS) and the Crown Office of the Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS), newspaper adverts and social media. SG, or more specifically, the Justice Analytical Service Division, provided access to details of respondents to the then latest sweep (2011/12) of the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey

(SCJS) who had indicated in the survey that they were happy to be re-contacted to participate in future research. Invitations to participate were sent to those residing in the central belt or Scottish Borders who had been victims of either personal or property crimes excluding only very minor offences (i.e. theft of milk bottles).

VSS displayed pamphlets advertising the research in their offices in both Edinburgh and Glasgow and also included information about the study on their website for a brief period. COPFS included a letter from the researcher inviting participation in the study to victims whose cases had come to a close. Due to time and budget limitations, these invitations went out only to potential participants living in the central belt and the south of Scotland (thereby excluding the Highlands and Islands). Adverts were also placed in a local newspaper on four different occasions as well as on local internet forums such as Gumtree and Facebook.

Interviews took place either in offices at the University of Edinburgh or where a participant was unable to attend the University, in their home. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed by a professional. Analysis of the data was carried in QSR NVIVO and included multiple steps. Data was first sorted thematically into relevant headings, i.e. impact, police interaction, court, et cetera. Following this, further coding and examination led to the development of the themes identified.

The resulting sample of victims was composed of: 58% women and 42% men. The age range of participants varied from 16 -74 with mean age of 44. 45% of the sample was Edinburgh based, with others coming primarily from Glasgow, the rest of Scotland and northern England and as such, cannot be considered representative of the experiences of victims in Scotland or more generally. That being said, a range of crime types were reported with 34% reporting multiple victimisations, and 54% reporting at least one incident of personal crime including assault, rape, murder (co-victims), racial harassment/hate crime, domestic violence, and child sexual assault. Property based crimes included housebreaking, theft arson, and vandalism. 80% of victims had reported their crime to the police, whilst only 38% reported having received any formal support. Many reported more than one incident of crime, but interviews generally focused on one incident of particular importance to the participant. The time between a given incident and the interview varied substantially from only a few days to up to twenty years.

Results

Analysis of this data soon revealed a distinct pattern of responses to interview questions addressing the meaning of what it is to be a victim and feeling in relation to the word 'victim'. The response to the word victim is overwhelmingly negative, as is demonstrated below. Additionally, findings indicate a distinct disconnect between how an incident of

crime is labelled and how a victim identifies themselves, indicating an acknowledgement of the incident as wrong and illegal, but denial of victimhood. When it comes to describing and understanding victimhood, three key themes emerged from the data. These were: weakness as a key characteristic of victims, the importance of distinguishing between victims and non-victims or the dichotomy of victim versus survivor, and the fluidity of the state of victimhood. Each of these key themes arguably all relate back to the undesirability of being a victim, which will be discussed first.

Thoughts and Reactions to the Word 'Victim'

It was in fact rather difficult to select only one or two quotations which best demonstrated the powerful reactions of victims to the word, as there were so many to choose from. For example,

'I don't think victim is a nice word ... I think you can have I don't know wrong connotations sometimes you know, if you're a victim then that makes you small, you've been trampled on or whatever and you could be trampled on again.'

P006, female

Of the many options available, this quotation was chosen as it highlights the awareness participants have of the negative societal reactions to victims. This respondent, very politely, recognises that victim is not a nice word, but also straightway addresses the unfavourable social connotations. This is one case however where the victim suggests

these connotations are wrong, rather than trying to avoid them. That being said, it is also rather clear why one would want to avoid the label when it is described as it here. 'Being trampled on' seems the perfect metaphor for what the aftermath of a crime may feel like to an overwhelmed victim. As the presence of barbed wires, guards, locked wards, and body searches in treatment facilities for the mentally ill could understandably discourage a would-be patient, a parallel situation is easily imagined for the would-be victim imagining the police officers, wigged judges, prosecutors and security which await in the criminal justice system. Finally, the weakness and vulnerability to be discussed further below is already apparent here. After being trampled on once, there is still the risk that it may happen again. As victims are aware of these risks, it therefore not surprising that they begin to take steps to distance themselves from the stereotype.

'I didn't really want to make myself out to be a victim so still it's my choice so when I went through with it, it was well, I just have to get on with it, I didn't really consider myself a victim and I definitely didn't make myself out to be one because I just didn't like the feeling of it.'

P039, female

This quote is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, the fact that the participant did not make herself out to be a victim implies that this is an active pursuit, that the label is not applied automatically. From a victimological perspective this makes perfect sense. Those victims who do not readily fit with the image of the ideal victim may find acknowledgement and sympathy in short supply (Christie, 1986). The notion of a choice is also significant as it relates to the suffering versus active coping discussed below. The

fact that this woman felt she actually had a choice is positive, but all victims may not be so fortunate; whether it be the victim who does not wish to be one (the designated victim), or the one who must fight for recognition of harms suffered (the rejected victim) (Strobl, 2010). It could be argued that the reasons behind this woman's choice reflect her awareness of the adverse associations with the victim label. She 'didn't make herself out to be one' is to an extent a method of self-promotion, or as Taylor et al., (1983) would put it 'a downward social comparison' whereby comparing oneself to another who, in this case, did consider them self to be a victim, this woman places herself in a more positive light. It also suggests that the participant did however have a taste of what it must have felt like to be a victim as she 'did not like the feeling of it'. Thus, it is possible for this woman at least, that the feelings of victimhood were so unpleasant that she made a conscious choice to not be one.

Moving on from these reactions to the word 'victim' is another rather telling result. Below is an excerpt from an interview transcript, showing a segment of conversation, the pattern of which was repeated often throughout the research,

INT: *'So just generally speaking would you consider what happened to you a crime?'*

RF: *'Yes it was a crime, yes I think so.'*

INT: *'And following on from that, did you, or did you then, or do you now think of yourself as a victim?'*

RF: *'No, not really, not really I don't think. I suppose I am but the feelings that I associate with victimhood I don't really have. Does that make sense? I am a victim of a crime but I have a notion of victimhood that probably it's not how I feel about myself.'*

P034, female

Is it possible to experience a crime and yet not be a victim? From an objective, technical perspective the answer is simple: no. However, reactions to crime and emotional and psychological processes are not always rational. This participant clearly recognises what has happened to her as a crime, and thereby both wrong and illegal. There is however no causal pathway between this fact and victimhood. She recognises that technically speaking, yes, she should be considered a victim, but the feelings associated with victimhood are absent. This then begs the questions as to what exactly are those feelings. The next section of this paper will address exactly that; the emotions such as weakness and vulnerability which victims describe as key characteristics of victimhood.

Weakness

When asked to discuss the word 'victim' the most common descriptor used by participants was weakness. Other related words and concepts included adjectives such as vulnerable and powerless. Participants throughout the study seem to have internalised the pessimistic societal associations with the word, providing ample motivation to distance themselves from the label.

For example,

'It's a word that implies powerlessness and I don't want to think of myself as powerless'

P007, female

'I hate the word victim; it makes you feel like you're weak and like I said I like to think of myself as not being weak'

P026, female

Power, or the lack of it, is inherent in the concept of weakness, and both are here demonstrated to be highly averse to victims. Naturally, these are not words one would want to associate with oneself, but victims may have a particular reason for doing so: protecting their foundational belief systems. Being portrayed as weak, vulnerable and powerless will act as a direct challenge to beliefs about one's invulnerability and positive self view. Numerous illnesses are related to a lack of control or power over one's own life and the concept of learned helplessness (Maier and Seligman, 1976; Abramson et al., 1978). Depression is the best-known example, though others include eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and social anxiety (Harding and Lachenmeyer, 1986; Gotlib and Beatty, 1985). This again helps to explain why victims distance themselves from the victim label. Weakness, and powerless and loss of control are key components of mental illness, something which victims are likely struggling with and seeking to avoid, not to mention the further stigma associated with mental ill health.

Victim yes.... I think it's a weak word, I think somebody, you can make somebody feel sorry for themselves or feel weak in a position by calling them a victim because, oh yes, you know victim makes it sound like something has happened to you and that you should feel sorry for yourself and you should feel weak and you should feel disempowered.

Maybe there could be other words for it but I think it's a word that yes, I can understand why it's used but I think it's a word that can make people feel worse off than they actually are.

P036, female

Feeling sorry for oneself, weak and disempowered could all arguably also be related to mental ill health. Particularly so when, as this woman puts it, it is how you 'should' feel. The use of the word 'should' again reflects the awareness of the societal expectations of victims of crime, which as described here are certainly not going to foster positive outcomes or recovery. In fact, it is likely that these expectations may make people 'feel worse off than they actually are.' The pressure to assume the characteristics is attributed to victims by society is significant and the consequences of doing otherwise can be potentially serious. For example, research demonstrates the greater the distress of the victim, the more innocent and deserving of help and sympathy they are perceived to be, and the more blame is placed on the offender (Tsoudis and Smith-Lovin, 1998; Chaikin and Darley, 1973). Thus, the appearance of suffering is key to both societal and individual conceptions of victimhood.

Distinguishing Victims from Non-victims: suffering versus coping and overcoming

The second theme identified focuses on how victims themselves distinguished between victims and non-victims, specifically through the lens of suffering versus effective

coping and overcoming. As has already been identified, the undesirability of the victim label is again reflected here,

‘I think victim is when you move into a position of vulnerability and powerlessness, into being in the clutches of that powerlessness and that inability to overcome whatever the negative is.’

P024, female

This woman powerfully evokes the negative image of the victim who refuses or who is unable to ‘overcome whatever the negative is.’ Being in the clutches of powerlessness and vulnerability, the inability to overcome, to move on, locks someone into the victim identity. This again suggests the weakness identified in the previous theme, and how weakness and victimhood are largely undesirable.

‘I dislike it because I don't feel that I am a victim, life throws things at you sometimes and it's how you deal with it that makes a difference and to me a victim is somebody who would cower away or lie down or walk away and that's not me at all.’

P011, female

In a similar vein, this participant describes the victim as ‘somebody who would cower away or lie down’. She then goes on to distance herself from this image, saying that these characteristics do not reflect her at all. Significantly, this woman highlights that ‘it is how you deal with it’ that distinguishes victims from the non-victim or survivors.

*‘I don't want to be thought of as a victim I will f*****g fight! I'm a victim to this, I'm a victim as in it has happened to me through no choice of mine but I wouldn't sit down and be a victim, I will fight back...’*

P007, female

Finally, this woman emphatically denounces the victim identity, powerful evidence as to just how strongly some victims oppose the label. Not only does she not want to be thought of as a victim, she will fight the label with everything she has. Like the other two women quoted above, she also references the victim as someone who would 'sit down' (versus lie down) and accept the powerlessness and vulnerability that comes along with being a victim. However, how these women deal with it, by fighting, makes them less likely to be identified as victims, and more so seen as survivors or simply non-victims.

By pursuing the image of the strong and resilient survivor rather than the weak and helpless victim, participants might be increasing the likelihood of others also refusing to ascribe to them victim status. The expression of anger and the desire for retribution contrast starkly with our image of the (ideal) victim, who is meant to be meek and forgiving (Christie, 1986). Van Dijk (2009) suggests victims 'must be willing to sacrifice their right to revenge', therefore those victims who espouse justice and actively pursue it, will contrast with society's image and may therefore risk disapproval and or stigma. This pattern reveals how society's response to crime victims tends to turn from sympathy into antipathy when victims defy the expected role (Van Dijk, 2009).

The question thus arises regarding the source of this pressure to survive rather than suffer. Is it societal in general, or does it arise from the movement which is meant to be helping victims? It should be noted that elsewhere in the study participants did refer directly to

the preference of certain support agencies to use the term survivor rather than victim. Is this label with the intention to impart strength and power actually depriving victims of the space to grieve their loss of self and beliefs? Neimeyer et al., (2002) describe this as the 'policing of grief' whereby society establishes norms for the feelings and behaviours of survivors. Prolonged or excessive grieving is likely to draw social disapproval, as the phenomena of empathy or compassion fatigue (Newell and MacNeil, 2010) are well documented, and the long-suffering victim is looked upon with disapproval, discomfort from friends and family but also from victims themselves (Bard and Sangrey, 1986). Hence the motivation to move from a state of victimhood to one of non-victimhood is likely reinforced through societal pressure.

Interesting as well is the fact that in this case, the pressure is coming from victims themselves. This may be due to either the societal pressures becoming ingrained; Goffman believed stigmatised individuals to hold the same beliefs about identity that we do (1963, p.17), or also an attempt to improve one's own outlook. This dichotomy of victim versus survivor is worrisome and problematic as it puts undue pressure on victims to 'get over it' and is thereby denying victims the right to grieve. Depression, anger, withdrawal, and tearfulness are all natural and normal responses to a traumatic incident and should not be demonised.

Fluidity

The final theme to emerge from the data related to the fluid nature of victimhood. In contrast to the permanency typically ascribed a stigmatic label, participants understood the state of victimhood to be fluid, changing over time, rather than static. Further, this fluidity is multi-directional, meaning that one may go from a state of non-victimhood into victimhood, but also back again, and that a state of victimhood does not necessarily immediately follow an incident of victimisation.

‘I am (a victim) but I don't like thinking of that word. But I was a victim, but I've come out the other side and I'm a survivor, he hasn't taken away me, I've not, I didn't die. Many times I wanted to, many times I tried to, but I've survived and I'm a different person for all of what happened to me and I like to think that I'm a nice person.’

P009, female

First of all, it is clear straight away how the victim feels about the label, not only does she dislike it but she dislikes even having to think about it. This could be related to the negative cognitions it evokes and the challenges to belief systems. However, she does recognise that at one point, closely following the original incident (and for many years afterwards) she did endure a state of victimhood. In this case, a particularly severe incident resulted in numerous suicide attempts and periods of hospitalisation. Despite this, with the passage of time and continual support, this woman now no longer feels a victim, but describes herself as a survivor. That being said, she also recognises that she is now a different person – significant as one feeling victims often describe is a loss of self;

which again may relate to a loss or challenge to pre-existing belief systems, which form an integral part of the self. It could also be argued that this woman's successful progress beyond victimhood provides an excellent example of someone who has successfully managed to integrate their new self-identity and beliefs about themselves and the world with their foundational beliefs; her statement that she believes she is a nice person is reflective of one such core belief, namely the self as good.

A second example below shows the opposite process: where this man moves from a state of non-victimhood into one of victimhood. Despite suffering a childhood sexual assault, the man quoted below did not consider it a victimising incident until much later in life when the perpetrator was arrested and he became involved in criminal proceedings.

'At the point when it happened I think I was too young to understand what a victim was, and then over the years I've blocked it away. But now, I've had to relive it, yes I do feel like I'm a victim.'

P003, male

'Being too young to understand what a victim was' suggests this man has a very clear image of what a victim is, perhaps focused on certain behaviours or characteristics as those discussed above (weakness etc.). However, as the victimisation occurred in childhood it is possible that the social role and behaviour expected of the victim was not yet ingrained. Further, despite not understanding or considering himself a victim following his experience, the participant does go on to describe behaviour characteristics

of sexual abuse survivors in his young adult and teenage years; rebellion, aggressiveness, difficulty at school et cetera (Browne and Finkelhor, 1986).

Having to relive the experience has however created a renewed state of victimhood, with the participant also describing emotions and behaviours one would expect had such an incident happened recently rather than twenty years previously. This pattern aligns with Fohring's (2015) model, in which a return to a pre-existing state of non-victimhood is possible (where one's foundational belief systems are intact) through either a process of healing involving the cognitive integration of trauma (cognitions) related to a victimising incident, or via the denial of victimhood altogether. In this case, by denying and not processing the victimisation in the past the participant was never able to incorporate the experience into their world view and eventually rebuild a healthy and functioning belief system. Therefore, when the victimisation was forced back into consciousness, it now must be processed and integrated in order to again move to a state of non-victimhood. In either case, the purpose is again to preserve pre-existing beliefs.

Discussion

The evidence presented thus far has clearly demonstrated that people who are affected by crime find the label of 'victim' to be highly undesirable. The participants interviewed for this research have demonstrated a clear distaste for the word itself, and distance themselves from it even when they acknowledge an incident to be a crime. When the

concept of victimhood is further investigated three key characteristics emerged: weakness, the dichotomy between suffering and coping, and the fluid nature of victimhood.

These results add to our understanding of avoidance of the victim label. This may happen not only through effective coping or minimising of an incident, but through fighting and overcoming suffering. Additionally, it now becomes apparent that, at least in some cases, there may be a conscious choice to avoid the victim label, though such a choice is not made freely. On the one hand, there is a keen awareness of the stigma associated with the label that will exert a powerful influence on the victim's choice. Indeed, the fear of being labelled may cause individuals to delay or avoid seeking help or reporting altogether, while those already labelled may still attempt to distance themselves, forgoing justice and available support (Link and Phelan, 2006).

At the same time, refusing a label that is associated with such undesirable qualities may also be indicative of the strength and resilience of victims; that they reject the label not out of fear for socially imposed stigma, but in opposition to it. In addition to the risks posed by social stigma, victims are also likely to be keenly aware of the other risks associated with identifying as a victim, namely secondary victimisation and further trauma at the hands of both the police and criminal justice system. Thus, avoiding the label may actually be an act of self-preservation and protection whereby the victim maintains ownership of their conflict (Christie, 1977). Research suggests that many

victims do not report crimes, particularly those of a sexual nature, for exactly these reasons (Sable et al., 2006). Every victim should of course be free to choose the best course of action for themselves, and informal support from friends and family may be preferable to formal options for many following incidents of crime. That being said, access to justice and formal support (including compensation) for better or worse, still depends on criminal justice contact, and therefore it remains important that those in need are not denied justice or support for fear of stigma or further victimisation. Therefore, the primary concern highlighted by this research is how the socially imposed stigma surrounding victimisation may be reinforcing poorer outcomes for victims. Such instances of social stigma undoubtedly add to the adverse effects of crime, whereas victims of crime with strong and diverse social support systems are less vulnerable than other victims to experiencing adverse psychological consequences (Kaniasty and Norris, 1992) those without will need to rely on formal support options.

Social support and socioeconomic status have a robust association with disease, death and victimisation: people with greater resources of knowledge, money, power, prestige, and social connections are generally better able to avoid risks and to adopt protective strategies. As stigma places people at a substantial social disadvantage with respect to these resources, it increases their exposure to risks and limits access to protective factors (Link and Phelan, 2006). Similarly, Hope and Trickett (2004) propose an immunity model of victimisation: rather than seeing victimisation as a consequence of excessive

selective exposure to risk, they suggest victimisation instead reflects certain victims' inability to remove themselves from risk, by virtue of their relative powerlessness to change their life-circumstances. Hope (2007) further justifies this theory of powerlessness by citing research showing that multiple victims were more likely to also exhibit other types of social economic vulnerability such as being younger adults, living with children, living in social housing in poorer, urban areas. Thus, victims share many of the social characteristics of economically marginal social groups; sectors of society that are also likely to suffer other misfortunes, including ill-health (Hope et al., 2001).

For the stigmatised individual then, including victims of crime, acceptance of society's views and the resultant self-stigmatisation may lead to concealment or active attempts to refute the stigmatising label in order to avoid discrimination. Unfortunately, for many victims, the consequences of concealment may often be more severe than those of resistance. In both cases the individual will face status loss and discrimination, but, depending on the nature and incidence of enacted stigma, people (like P007 quoted above) who adopt resistance strategies may actually face less stigma, experience less social harm, and be better able to cope with any discrimination. The reason for this is that in refuting the victim label they are able to protect their foundational belief systems and thereby maintain a sense of control and avoid learned weakness and helplessness. By acknowledging that a crime has happened yet refuting this status, that may be exactly what the victims in this research are doing. This of course requires further empirical

support, but existing research does suggest that maintaining foundational beliefs is good for mental health and wellbeing (Taylor et al., 2000). Likewise, others have argued that assuming at least some responsibility for one's victimisation has the benefit of keeping control with the victim; meaning they retain the power to change their behaviour to avoid future victimisation (Bard and Sangrey, 1986).

Such complexities are inherent in the delicate task of providing support to crime victims. Arguably, what is needed is a more proactive approach of educating the public about the impact of crime and the role of social support, both perceived and received, in coping with criminal victimization. Addressing the social stigma towards victims is however no simple task and not something which can be accomplished overnight, if ever. Further victim oriented legislation may deter harmful conduct or provide recompense when harm has been done, but it will not necessarily change the attitudes that produce the behaviour (Neimeyer et al., 2002). However, as argued by Kaniasty and Norris (1992) the need to address such stigma through multiple avenues is largely justified by criminal statistics, as despite lower than ever crime levels, it is still highly likely that, whether as victim or provider, at some point in our lives, we will all be touched by crime.

Weaknesses and Further Research

This study suffers the same weakness inherent in any qualitative study, the fact that results are simply not generalisable beyond the current sample. That being said, the value is still evident. This is a considerably large sample for qualitative work, and the patterns identified raise some pertinent questions as to the treatment of victims of crime within society. These questions may of course be further investigated, and may benefit particularly from the use of quantitative methods to further support the qualitative work reported here. Of course, statistical techniques will not likely be able to further our understanding of how and why victims interpret the labels assigned to them, but it may allow further investigation of the impact the label has on behaviour (such as reporting crime and using victim services).

Finally, it should also be noted that this pattern of behaviour will not play out for all victims of crime. The opposite side of the coin is also highly problematic: victims who seek recognition and yet are denied the status. This opposing problem has a set of equally concerning outcomes for victims including a lack of support and services provided to recognised victims as well as few avenues to justice.

Conclusion

It has become increasingly clear that victims of crime are likely to encounter any number of reasons for wanting to avoid being labelled as just that, a victim. This paper has argued that two powerful motivators converge to influence the identity chosen by individuals post crime. Social stigma associated with victimisation sets out a fairly clear cluster of behaviours that are expected of victims including weakness and vulnerability, as well as suffering and passivity. The costs of going against this model may be victim blaming, ostracization and exclusion. This social stigma will also underlie the cognitive decision-making processes through which a victim chooses to associate (or not) with the victim label. As society will blame or derogate the victim to protect its foundational beliefs, so too will the victim take steps to protect theirs. The unfortunate outcome is fewer victims reporting their crimes to the authorities, and poorer chances of recovery and healing for those who do.

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