Victimology: Then and Now
By Merlene Reynolds

Victimology is the study of crime and its victims. The perpetrator or offender is at one end of the spectrum and the victim at the other. Each represents opposing sides in the war against right or wrong. “Responsibility for one’s conduct is a changing concept and its interpretation is a true mirror of the social, cultural, and political conditions of the given era,” explains Stephen Schafer, in his 1968 book, The Criminal and his Victim.

Societal Attitudes

Societal attitudes towards victims rise and fall in relation to the prevailing attitude of the times. Contemporary laws, combined with the premise that the criminal is responsible for reparation to the victim, reflects the “nature of societal interrelationships and the ideology of the ruling power structure,” continues Schafer. As more people become victims of crime, the more active they become in the political process in search of justice, emotional closure, financial restitution, and personal vindication. The difficulty lies not in the ideology as we always promote fairness and good deeds towards men. Instead, the difficulty lies in what to do to prevent crime and, if it occurs, determine a stabilizing balance between justice for the state and justice for the individual.

Criminal Rights vs. Victim Rights

Increased interest in the reformation of the criminal is matched by decreasing care for and the interest in the victim,” explains Schafer. “It is rather absurd,” continues Schafer, “that the state undertakes to protect the public against crime and then, when a loss occurs, takes the entire payment and offers no effective remedy to the individual victim.” The victim suffers a form of double-jeopardy – once as a victim, and, then again through the “hardships of the civil process,” states Schafer.

Interest in victimology and the criminal-victim relationship increased in the 1950s when Rhonda J. Milliken brought attention to the post-crime suffering of the victim. Milliken believed that the victim suffers not only from the crime itself, but also from a series of events that serve to “scar deeply and sometimes damage irreparably the human being for whose protection the public clamors,” reports Schafer.

Andrew Karmen, Crime Victims: An Introduction to Victimology, held similar views, in 1984, when he pointed out the disparity between rhetoric and action by noting that “the protection of society and the interests of the government overshadow the demands of victims.” The offenders, continues Karmen, “are provided with lawyers, housing, food, medical care, recreational opportunities, schooling, job training, and psychological counseling.” However, “victims must fend for themselves.”

The rights of the injured or the victim slowly began to dissolve as the state monopolized the institution of punishment. “Individual compensation, if any, was largely related to property damage and generally did not apply to personal injuries,” explains Schafer. “The amount of compensation varied according to the nature of the crime, and the age, rank, sex, and prestige of the injured party,” continues Schafer. The victim was evaluated by his community and punishment, reparation, restitution, and compensation

Merlene Reynolds  ©Copyright 2014  Page 1
were determined “in accordance with the value of the injured person.” The social status of the victim determined the level of compensation allowed or provided. The lower the social status of the victim within the community, the less obliged the criminal was to compensate the victim for any harm done. “The victim became the ‘poor relation’ of the criminal law,” states Schafer.

**Founders of Victimology**

Criminologists Mendelsolm (1963) and Von Hentig (1948) are credited as being the first to theorize about victimology. They were particularly interested in victims of homicide. Mendelsolm was the first to develop the idea of “victim precipitation” which suggests that the victim of a crime had “an aptitude, although unconsciously, of being victimized,” explains Karola Dillenburger, in a 2007 article published *The International Journal of Behavioral Consultation and Therapy*, “A Behavior Analytic Perspective on Victimology.”

Mendelsolm proposed the term “victimology” in an effort to develop an independent field of study and perhaps a new discipline. Victimology, according to Mendelshom, “is not a branch of criminology but a science parallel to it,” explains Schafer. Mendelshom considered it “the reverse of criminology.”

**Victim Precipitation**

Mendelsohn’s theory of victim precipitation proposed that victims look, think, and act differently than non-victims which increase their likelihood of becoming victims. Hentig “may have been the first to suggest that the victim himself is one of the many causes of a crime,” reports Schafer. Hentig held similar theories twenty years earlier and believed that “in a sense, the victim shapes and molds the criminal and his crime and that the relationship between perpetrator and victim may be much more intricate than our criminal law with its rough and mechanical definitions and destinations, would suggest,” and, therefore, continues Schafer, a “reciprocality exists between the criminal and victim.”

**Types of Victims**

Hentig is also credited with the categorization of victims on the basis of their personality types. Hentig labeled victim types as the depressive, greedy, wonton, and tormentor. The “depressive” types, according to Hentig, “were the easiest target” because they were careless and unsuspecting. The “greedy” types were “easily deceived because of their insatiability” and the “wonton” type was vulnerable because of their “neediness.” The “tormentor” type was “attacked by the victim of his abuse.”

More currently, victims are categorized based on the type of crime committed against them. There are victims of natural disasters, accidents, mass homicide, bodily injury and personal injury. This list is not all inclusive but demonstrates the variety of ways the average citizen can quickly become a victim.

**Conclusion**

Societal attitudes towards victims rise and fall in relation to the prevailing attitude of the times. The prevailing attitude is reflected by the ideology of the ruling power.
structure. Through legislative changes or presidential speeches, the pendulum swings. The pendulum swings slowly.

The pendulum swings too slowly for the victim. It has been over 66 years since Hentig first theorized about victimology. It has been over 50 years since Mendelsolm refined Hentig’s theory. It has taken until the 21st century for most citizens to recognize the need to not only prosecute the criminal, but also to seek substantial ways to restore the victim through moral support and monetary means in an effort to repair the psychological damage and financial loss most victims suffer at the hands of one criminal. Instead of spending millions of dollars on one more monument to memorialize the dead, maybe we should spend more money on the living.

**Additional Reading**

