Fear of Crime and Criminal Victimization

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Victimization by Critical Life Events

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Victimization is characterized by some damages or losses, e.g. the loss of freedom, health, wealth, love, the feeling of security or invulnerability, social status, and so forth. Some losses may be realized, others are merely impending, nevertheless, they may yet be experienced as a loss of subjective security, of the belief in invulnerability, or of trust in other people.

The Issues of Responsibility and Injustice

Suffering losses through crimes, accidents, illnesses, plant closure, crashes at the stock market, or whatever event raises questions about whether the losses are just “bad fate”, whether a deity is punishing the victims, whether the victim him- or herself is responsible, or whether others are responsible. Closely related to the question “Who is responsible?” are issues of justice: Is the loss deserved or not? Is anyone obligated to compensate the loss? Is anyone to blame or to punish?

Perceiving injustice presupposes the view that another person or institution has violated the victim's justified entitlements either by action or by omission. If losses were incurred through the victim's own behavior and decisions, if, in other words, they were self-inflicted, injustice is not an issue: the racing driver suffering an accident through his own fault, the gambler who lost his money in Monte Carlo or on the stock market, the AIDS-patient who was not willing to use safer-sex practices, or the heavy smoker with lung cancer, they all may not perceive their losses as unjust. Losses resulting from freely chosen risky activities are not conceived of as unjust, especially when the risks were anticipated and accepted in view of possible gains or pleasant experiences. At the core of injustice is the perception of a responsible agent or agency who is neglecting or violating the entitlements of others who thereby become victims.

It makes a difference whether those who suffer losses perceive themselves as victims of blind fate, as victims of actions or decisions of others, as losers in a game, or as victims of their own risky actions, of wrong decisions, or of negligent behavior. Whenever victims perceive themselves as being responsible for bad events and their consequences we might expect feelings of guilt, shame, or self-directed anger, not, however, feelings of injustice like anger, resentment or outrage, that motivate blame and punishment.

Experienced injustice adds to the primary experience of hardship, loss or strain. In a study on paraplegic accident victims (Montada, 1992), for instance, perceived injustice of one's own fate proved to be the best single (negative) predictor by far for adjustment measured as mastery of losses subjectively rated in comparison to other paraplegics. Issues of (in-)justice, however, are rarely focused explicitly in empirical studies. There is considerably more indirect evidence...
Victimization by Crime: A Special Case?

The question has to be raised whether psychological research on critical life events in general such as the experience of bereavement, injury, serious illness, divorce, unemployment, and so forth could provide knowledge that will be useful in understanding criminal victimization and in coping with it. The answer will be that there is a considerable overlap allowing the transfer of hypotheses.

Certainly, crimes are a special category of critical life events. There is an agent, the offender, who is held responsible for the victimization. However, other events may also be affected - or perceived as being affected - by agents who are held responsible: traffic accidents caused by car drivers, loss of jobs caused by employers, losses at the stock market caused by a broker, loss of lodgings caused by the owners, loss of law suits due to an incompetent lawyer or an unfair judge, loss of a spouse by divorce, loss of one's health caused by a careless physician, and so forth. Some other people may be perceived responsible for the losses. Thus, victimization is not confined to crimes alone but can also be conceived of with other events that result in losses.

The main difference between losses through crimes and losses through other man-made events is that a crime means breaking a penal law not just a moral law, a promise, betraying trust, solidarity, social responsibility. However, it is frequently open to question whether a behavior is a crime or whether it is an excusable behavior or a justifiable act. The answer is quite often not unanimous: the victim, the prosecutor, the lawyer, the judge, the public, they all may have different views. Certainly, the prototype of unjust victimization is crime. There are, however, many other events which are made of the same core components.

The Experience of Victimization: A Subjective Construction

Different views are generally observed in all cases of loss caused by critical life events. The way these views are formed by both victims and observers or by members of the victim's social networks is the main concern of this chapter.

Victims may evaluate the experienced damages or losses that result from critical life events as more or less serious, more or less lasting, more or less unjust, or along some other dimensions (cf. Reichle & Montada, 1991). These evaluations are subjective ones, even when others contribute to their formation. They may depend on personal value or motive systems, on the availability of personal, social or economic resources for compensation, rehabilitation or adjustment as well as on specific subjective views about causation and responsibility, entitlements and obligations. These subjective views and evaluations contribute a good deal to the impact the loss or hardship will have on future life and development, they contribute to the morale of victims, to their mood, to their mental and physical health, and to psychological problems as indicated by negative emotions of varying intensity (e.g., hopelessness, fears, shame, resentment). The impact of subjective views was not regularly compared to the impact of the objective seriousness of losses or problems. In studies by Frey and coworkers with accident victims it was demonstrated, however, that subjective views contribute significantly more to the process of recuperation than the seriousness of injuries rated objectively by medical experts (Frey, 1992).

In the process of taking or forming views about the victimizing event, causal explanations and the attribution of responsibility are particularly important. Some of the perceived causes may be actions or omissions of human agents (car drivers, criminals, physicians, brokers, etc.), other causes are not or only partially under human or societal control (some illnesses, natural catastrophes, some economic developments). The responsibility for losses may be attributed to the victims themselves as well as to other agents, to institutions, to the state, to society, or to a deity. Feelings of injustice, of helplessness, beliefs of uncontrollability are mainly due to these attributions of causation and responsibility, and these feelings and beliefs, in turn, will mainly determine adjustment (in terms of well-being, mood and morale) and health. There is empirical evidence that ascribing responsibility for losses to others goes along with poor physical or mental health, poor adjustment, and more intense negative emotions. Affleck, Tennen, Croog, and Levine (1987) reported this for victims of heart attacks, Bulman and Wortman (1977) and Albs and Montada (1991) for paralyzed accident victims, Frey and collaborators for less heavily injured accident victims and HIV-positives (Frey, 1992), Taylor (1983) for cancer patients.

Empirical evidence is only available for some cases of victimization. However, there are no a priori reasons why the issues of (in)justice and (un)controllability should not be applicable to all categories of experienced loss and hardship no matter if they result from crimes, accidents, illnesses, war, technical catastrophes, economic depression or whatever.

When victimized, many people tend to regain security by using specific coping strategies to avoid feelings of injustice, of helplessness, or loss of control. Taking specific views on critical life events may be a way of coping with them. In the present chapter, coping with victimizing events will be discussed under the specific perspective of two motives: the motive to avoid the view of being the victim of injustice and the motive to maintain the view to have control over one's fate and one's future. People want to believe that they live in a just and controllable world where everybody gets what he/she deserves and where they themselves (or, at least, trustworthy others) have control over their fate (for overviews see Lerner, 1980; Shaver, 1970; Steil & Slochower, 1985). Experiencing losses and hardships may imply that both beliefs are violated. There are specific aspects of the victimizing event as well as of reactions and comments of others that are particularly problematic with respect to these two motives.

In the following sections some aspects of events, some beliefs, and some ways of coping with perceived injustice are reported and discussed.
The Question "Why me?" and Its Impact on Adjustment

Many victims, not all, ask the question "Why me?" after experiencing a serious loss. This question may reflect the justice problems victims might have with their fate. Why is it just me who is suffering this fate? If there is no reasonable answer, a justice problem is given. Imagine a cancer patient who did not smoke or who did not expose him- or herself to the known carcinogens. Or imagine an elderly woman whose rental contract for her apartment, where she had lived half of her lifetime, was terminated while none of her neighbors lost their lodging. It has been empirically determined that asking "Why me?" is associated with a longer stay in the hospital, with more medical complications following an accident, with a poorer immunological state of HIV-patients, with poorer physical and mental well-being following the death of a spouse (Frey, 1992). I would like to add that health and adjustment may depend on what answers are given to the "Why me?"-question. It makes quite a difference whether or not a reasonable answer is found (Meier, 1991). I will come back to this point later.

The Number of Victims Suffering Similar Losses

Some events like war, natural, technical, or economic catastrophes usually affect a larger proportion of a population. In such cases, the experience of injustice is less likely than it will be in cases when only one or a few people are affected and are suffering. In the latter cases, the victims' question "Why me?" is obvious and, all other equal, the notion to be unjustly victimized will be more probable than in cases when others of one's own reference group and the population in general are affected similarly or even worse (Montada, 1991, 1992).

Several arguments may deliver a rationale for this hypothesis:

(1) Among other factors, the notion of injustice depends upon the observation that equal individuals "are treated" unequally. This is the Aristotelian definition of injustice. If no similar others, no "peers", are affected likewise, and if there are no obvious reasons to believe that the victim deserved his or her fate then it will become likely for a victim to respond with feelings of injustice.

(2) In general, victims tend to contact others who suffer a similar fate and many of them gain morale, a positive mood, and self-enhancement by downward comparisons (Taylor, Buunk, Collins, & Reed, 1992; Wills, 1992). The fact that others are suffering a similar or even worse misfortune offers the possibility to contact them and make downward comparisons that will result in a subjectively reduced loss experience.

(3) When many people share a bad fate, it will be far less likely that single victims are held responsible for the bad fate by assuming individual "internal" causes of the event. According to principles of common causal reasoning (cf. Kelley, 1973), internal causes of single persons are inferred when nobody else suffers the same outcome or fate. Assuming internal causes means that the "misfortune" is self-inflicted by the victim. This assumption motivates the expression of negative or derogative comments toward the victim as well as a refusal to give the victim support (cf. Montada, 1992). Either reaction may be experienced by the victim as a secondary victimization which is especially unjust. I will come back to this issue when discussing secondary victimization.

Of course, shared fate as compared to individual fate cannot always prevent feelings of injustice. If, for instance, unemployment is unequally and inequitably frequent within one stratum or group of a population, the group as a whole may feel relatively deprived (Crosby, 1976).

Controllability

Losses through critical life events are not per se just or unjust. As stated above, injustice implies that another person or institution is held responsible. A person suffering disadvantages that were caused by one's own decisions does not have a target for complaints about unjust victimization. Racing drivers who survive an accident but are left physically handicapped will not complain about injustice as long as they consider the accident their own fault or a natural risk of this sport. Kidney donors will presumably not perceive themselves as victims but rather as moral heroes as long as they were free to decide whether or not to donate one of their kidneys (and as long as the surgeon did not make a mistake in transplanting the organ): feelings of injustice are unlikely when losses result from voluntary engagements; one's own decisional control implies responsibility for the consequences.

Self-Blame

Bulman and Wortman (1977) reported evidence that some paralyzed accident victims who accepted some of the responsibility for the accident were better adjusted than others, especially the ones who blamed others for having caused the accident. Schultz and Decker (1985) reported similar findings. Corresponding data were reported for parents whose children had died of leukemia (Chodoff, Friedman, & Hamburg, 1964), for people who had lost their relatives in concentration camps (Rappaport, 1971), for rape victims (Burgess & Holmstrom, 1979; Janoff-Bulman, 1979; Medea & Thompson, 1974), and battered women who frequently expressed self-blame rather than outrage about their husband's brutality (Frieze, 1979; Martin, 1978).

However, there are also contradictory findings. Rogner, Frey, and Havemann (1987), for instance, found a poorer course of recovery in accident victims who felt their accident would have been avoidable. In a study about rape victims, Meyer and Taylor (1986) found self-blame negatively related to adjustment.

Evidence of different or even contradictory effects of "self-blame" is not surprising. Self-blame - or more correctly, attributing responsibility to oneself - may result in various emotional evaluations which indeed are expected to have a different impact on adjustment (cf. Montada, 1992 for a more detailed discussion). In other words: the conclusions a victim draws from responsibility attributions to him- or herself may be quite different. Of course, self-blame is implied in feelings of guilt or anger about an avoidable own mistake, and these emotions are an additional stress. On
the other hand, attributing some responsibility to oneself may prevent, alleviate, or reduce the wish to blame others and the associated emotions of outrage, hatred, or bitterness, and it may be associated with the belief in future control and avoidability.

If responsibility implies avoidability, a victim might believe to be able to avoid a second victimization of that kind. Think of a woman who considers her careless behavior to have been the occasion for the rapist: She may feel safer compared to another woman since she believes that she was and will be in control of her fate. Of course, in order to be functional in this sense, self-blame must be related to controllable and changeable activities or characteristics (Janoff-Bulman, 1979). Attributing a victimization to stable internal characteristics like abilities does not help to gain confidence in a future control.

Generalizing this view, self-blame may help some people to avoid viewing their own lives as being controlled by blind fate, a notion that is likely to undermine feelings of security and invulnerability. Chodoff et al. (1964) and Wortman (1983) suggested that some people prefer to blame themselves rather than perceiving themselves at the mercy of chance and blind fate.

In the above mentioned empirical study on paraplegic accident victims (Albs & Montada, 1991; Montada 1992) we were able to validate some of the above assumptions about the various effects of "self-blame". Attributing responsibility to oneself ("self-blame") was not substantially correlated with indicators of adjustment (e.g., mastering of losses, emotional balance, lack of continuing sadness). This is easy to understand, because attributing responsibility to oneself was positively correlated to guilt feelings by the victims and negatively to hostile feelings toward others who had contributed to the accident or the injury (hostile feelings like anger or outrage about others, or hate). Both guilt feelings and hostile feelings toward others had substantial negative effects on adjustment. Therefore, for the individual victim, the impact of "self-blame" depends on the resulting emotions: If the resulting emotion is guilt, the impact will be a negative one; if the result of self-blame is a reduction of hostility toward others, the effect will be a positive one. In the sample of accident victims as a whole there was not a general association between self-blame and adjustment.

Coping Strategies that May Help to Avoid Feelings of Injustice

The need for justice might be satisfied by asserting an entitlement and carrying it through all the way to court with the intention to obtain adequate compensation for disadvantages and/or with the goal of having the offender punished. I am not aware of systematic investigations of the effects court sentences have on victims' health and adjustment. Everyday experiences teach us, however, that outrage, helplessness, or bitterness will be evoked if a sentence is not accepted as just or if a procedure in court is not considered to be fair. These emotions constitute new problems that have to be coped with in addition to the primary losses. (Problems of raped women bringing their case to trial will be discussed in more detail later.) Tyler (1990) reported empirical studies evidencing that ratings of procedural fairness (for instance, having been given "voice", objective consideration of one's arguments) are even more important for an overall contentment than ratings of the outcome itself.

I am also not aware of any research on the question of which people are willing to bring their case to trial, which ones aren't (possibly because they do not expect to succeed or because they fear the risk of a secondary victimization), and which people tend to subjectively reduce the strain of being victimized by using appropriate coping strategies. There are coping strategies that may be understood as strategies to reduce or avoid feelings of injustice. Self-blame may be one of these strategies (the strategic use may be assumed in cases that lack any objective evidence of a causal contribution by the victim), however, there are more (cf. Taylor, 1983): using downward comparisons, imagining things could still be worse, looking for gains in the victimizing event which would compensate the losses to some extent (e.g., gaining freedom by getting an unwanted divorce, gaining the experience of being loved and supported when falling seriously ill, gaining self-esteem by one's own morale vis à vis serious adversities or by one's rehabilitation progress after serious injury or a stroke). The functional value of these coping strategies in the sense of avoiding or reducing feelings of injustice is outlined elsewhere in more detail (Montada, 1991, 1992). Here I will discuss just one more coping strategy: the search for meaning.

The Search for Meaning

The question "Why me?" may be considered as an expression of the ongoing search for meaning in the event. What does it mean when we say that the event and its consequent losses are senseless or meaningless? Several answers can be given: (1) There can be no reasons found why the event occurred at all, or (2) why it occurred to the victim. (3) No positive consequences of the event can be identified, neither for the victim nor for anyone else.

A prototype of a senseless and meaningless event is an event which randomly happened to the victim causing him or her an irrevocable loss which the victim is not able to experience as a challenge or to make any positive use of (for instance, to consider it as an occasion to reorder the priorities in life, or to gain new insights into the self and the world, etc.).

Attributing meaning to an event causing a loss may possibly be twofold: (1) The event is not meaningless if it was produced by the goal-directed actions of an agent. If the event was intentionally aimed at by an agent it is meaningful to everyone grasping the agent's intentions. Take as an example an offender who has planned a robbery, and the victim suffered injury in trying to defend his/her property. This is a meaningful story: The victim's injuries can be understood as the normal side-effects of robberies. (2) The event is not meaningless if it happened as a well known risk of ongoing intentional activities including those of the victim him/herself: the causal chain leading to the lossful event will at least be understood. Let us look at some examples. A fireman who is hurt while fighting a fire will find meaning in his injury by considering it an accepted risk of his profession. The mountaineer who tumbles off while climbing the rocks knew of this risk and accepted it as reasonable compared to the marvellous experiences.
his beloved sport granted him. Losses that are self-inflicted or that result from freely chosen risky activities cannot be unjust and they will be understood as a consequence of taking these risks.

Losses that happened or were inflicted without a reason cannot be understood, and, subsequently, they cannot be considered as just or justified. The bible Hiob must have felt a deep relief when he finally got the insight that all his suffered losses were due to God testing his piety. And some others may avoid feelings of unjust victimization by considering the bad event a deserved punishment for previous sins.

Not every cognition of an agent’s reasons, of course, will take away feelings of unjust victimization. The victimizing agent may be blamed for his/her deeds, the state may be blamed for not having protected the victim or not having punished the offender, society may be blamed for producing a social climate favoring specific kinds of offences. Yet, identifying an agent and his/her reasons for an action may be a precondition for getting justice by having him or her punished.

A second category of meaning found (or generated) is not the (re-)construction of the occurrence of a loss but the identification of positive consequences from the event and the resulting loss. Victims who are finally able to say “It was terribly hard but I mastered my fate” state that they gave the loss the status of a challenge. Retrospectively, critical events may be viewed as creating the opportunities for experiencing gains: to meet one’s spouse, to find out who one’s true friends are, to reorganize life priorities, to discover new intellectual or philosophical insights, etc. (cf. Meier, 1991). All this provides the event with a positive meaning, just as if a deity would have manipulated the cause of the event in the victim’s ultimate interests.

Finding a meaning in losses by focusing on mastering, on successful coping, or on subsequent gains changes the balance of losses and gains and reduces injustice.

Secondary Victimization by Others

When someone experiences a victimizing life event, the overriding tendency of others is to try to help or support the victim in some way. Support may have various forms: material help, advice, health care, emotional understanding, clarification of problems, help in making appropriate decisions, or sometimes simply listening to complaints.

In many cases, support may be helpful in coping with the actual problem and with distress. But support may also have problematic effects: it may create dependency, it may create an obligation to reciprocate, it may be problematic for the self-esteem of the victim, it may be ineffective and even awkward. One and all, the effects of support granted are not consistent across subjects, support-providers and situations (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1992).

What is much more consistent are the effects of negative reactions toward the victims by others. They have negative effects. There are some studies showing that negative social reactions are a much better predictor of well-being and adjustment (a negative one, of course) than positive support received is (e.g., Abbey, Abrams, & Caplan, 1985; Pagel, Erdly, & Becker, 1987; Rook 1984).

It is not seldom that others respond to victims in hurtful ways, either consciously or inadvertently. These responses may mean a “secondary victimization” that might be experienced as being even more devastating than the primary loss. Research on various victimized populations (cancer patients, bereaved people, raped women, depressed people, victims of accidents, etc.) has unveiled ample empirical evidence of secondary victimizations and distinguished different categories of hurtful responses. The focus of research was both on the causes of negative responses and on the effects these responses had on the victims.

In a recent review of the literature Bennett-Herbert and Dunkel-Schetter (1992) list various negative social reactions towards victims such as rude/insensitive remarks, negative emotional reactions, negative evaluations, blame, derogation, physical avoidance, rejections and discriminations, inconsistency in terms of mixed positive and negative reactions, alternating support and absence of support (withdrawing support after having granted it initially might be particularly disappointing and depressing, just as promises of contact and support that are not fulfilled).

I would like to point to the particular problems of injustice that are generated by social responses toward people who suffer a hardship or a loss. It is the aspect of injustice that turns these responses into a secondary victimization. Again, to perceive a treatment as unjust requires the victim’s entitlements to be violated by others. Which are the victim’s entitlements? Are those who suffer a loss of health, wealth, loved ones etc. entitled to receive social support in terms of material, emotional, medical, or advisory help? Who is obligated to help? In which cases? Based on what reasons? These are the general questions. I will promote some suggestions for a few specific cases.

Secondary Victimization by Ignoring Victims’ Claims

Remember that it is the expectations and claims of victims that are crucial for the arousal of feelings of injustice. Victims’ expectations of support may be based on various “principles”. Victims may feel they are living in a community of love and solidarity where every needy member receives support. They may think of the norm of reciprocity and expect support from those whom they have cared for earlier. They may think of generalized reciprocity and of their own prior investments for the community in general. They simply may expect continuity of the care and support that was offered right after the loss event. They may compare themselves to other victims and observe that others receive more support, attention, or loving understanding. Or they may consider their status as patients, as citizens, as family members etc. and expect others to have obligations toward them because of social positions and social roles.
Turning back to the case of being the victim of a crime or of careless or negligent behavior of others, we have to mention some entitlements that are more specific.

(1) Victims have beliefs or convictions about who is responsible for the victimization, and they frequently insist that their views are objectively true. Refusing these views or even doubting them may be experienced as unjust and as a biased ignorance of facts. If a victim feels that principles of procedural justice are not observed in court, e.g. his/her view of the case or his/her claims are not understood or considered objectively, resentment and outrage might result (Tyler, 1990).

(2) Attributing responsibility to the victim or blaming the victim for having self-inflicted the loss may be experienced as stigmatization. By bringing the rapist to trial, the rape victim may indeed not only risk the sentence "Not guilty" and subsequently her belief in a just society but she may also risk losing her reputation (cf. Krahé, 1985). In the end she herself will be stigmatized. Stigmatization may lead to isolation and to social rejection. Some rape victims who experienced this had to move from their neighbourhood (Symonds, 1975).

(3) Ignoring or refusing a victim’s claims for restitution or compensation are a further kind of victimization: The victim may experience this as a violation of just entitlements and a case of injustice.

(4) Ignoring the victim’s claims for blaming and punishing the offender may not be such an obvious case of secondary victimization. However, victims are frequently outraged if an obvious violation of a law is not persecuted. There are legitimate claims to enforced laws and regulations and to punish perpetrators. If this is not done by the police and by the courts, it may be viewed as a form of “structural” victimization (Nagel, 1979) which means victimization by state institutions (in this case by neglecting the obligation to protect citizens and to enforce the law). Structural victimization of minorities was identified as one of the events precipitating extreme outrage leading to overt aggression and riots (Lieberman & Silverman, 1965). Michael Kohlhaas in Kleist’s Drama became a terrorist because his claims for having his case brought to trial were unjustly rejected or neglected. Societal rules and laws imply an entitlement to have them enforced.

(5) There are other cases of victims who are being cheated of their status as victims. We may encounter effects of this neglect in various phenomena. Nagel (1979) reported that in 1973 the psychiatrist Dr. Bastiaans founded a hospital for victims of the Nazi occupation in the Netherlands. He observed that many victims who already seemed to have gotten over their traumatic experiences developed psychiatric problems in their sixties again. Many of them reported enormous problems with two facts which they perceived as gravely unjust: 1) Most former collaborators of the Nazis (police-officers, judges, clerks, politicians) who had participated in the persecution and deportation of victims or who at least, did not protect them, now held their former positions in state and society again. 2) There was a collective denial of crimes that were committed during the war and the occupation which was experienced as a denial of their victimization. Statements such as “One must be able to make an end” or “One must be able to forgive” represented this attitude. The victims suffered from being cheated of their status as victims. If the harm done is forgiven by society it might hurt the victims and their claim for restitution through punishment. The victims may ask: "Who is entitled to forgive; the observer, society or only the victims themselves?" Many victims feel that nobody but they are entitled to forgive the offender.

In this respect, Goffman’s analysis of a true and complete apology is enlightening (Goffman, 1971). According to him a complete apology is characterized by the following components: 1) The apologizing offender expresses emotional distress, 2) knowledge of the applicable moral norms, 3) acceptance of responsibility for his or her actions or omissions, 4) acceptance of his or her liability for blame, 5) willingness to observe the violated moral or legal rule in the future, and 6) acknowledgement that the victim is the primary addressee for the apology. In fact, victims are more likely to forgive when the harmdoer confesses his or her guilt and accepts the blame or punishment as justified. Programs of victim-offender exchanges which try to bring together the harmdoer and the victim in order to have them negotiate an adequate restitution or compensation give occasion for an acknowledgment of the victim status by the offender (Schneider, 1979).

Indifference on the part of society, including the police, toward the victim’s plight is a very common phenomenon (Symonds, 1975). Being the victim of a crime such as mugging or rape is an extraordinarily dramatic experience for the victim. For the police, this is daily routine work with a low probability to apprehend and convict the offender. Statements like “You are not the only one who was mugged today; we get plenty of other calls” deprive the victim of the very status of a victim.

For some victims it appears as if society is much more preoccupied with fairness towards the defendant than with fairness towards the victim. It is indeed a very valuable goal of the juridical system to give the defendant a fair and objective trial and to try to avoid his or her stigmatization as far as possible. However, victims and their entitlements get regrettably less attention. In court, the victim’s role is that of a witness. In order to guarantee fairness to the defendant, it is legitimate to treat the witness with scepticism and entertain doubts about his or her credibility. These doubts are not only allowed, they are even prescribed as a duty in criminal investigation and in court. The consequences for the victim/witness are still only partially recognized (O’Hara, 1970). Correspondingly, victims may develop doubts about justice in society and about a state that not only failed to protect them against the offenders but also failed to side with them after they were victimized.

(6) Punishing the victim is the last kind of victimization to be mentioned. Not only may support and help be withheld, the victim may even become punished. A mother, whose young child dies in an accident, is frequently blamed for negligence. Of course, social blame and discrimination happens more frequently outside the courts. Consider AIDS-patients who lose their job or their lodging because of their illness (Blasband, 1989), or long-term unemployed people who are stigmatized as unable or lazy (Hayes & Nutman, 1981).
The effects of negative social reactions are obvious. They may mean a secondary victimization adding to the primary one, and this may indeed mean an even greater loss than the primary victimization was. Remember that many victims of misfortune reported that the experience of social support, especially emotional support including the understanding and the acceptance of their negative emotions, had helped them to master their fate and to gain adequate levels of well-being (cf. Dunkel-Schetter & Wortman, 1981). In contrast, negative social reactions are victimizing because they destroy trust in solidarity and justice and, therefore, they destroy trust in social security. It is interesting to have a closer look at the causes or rather the motives and reasons for negative social reactions.

**Causes and Reasons for Negative Social Reactions**

There is growing literature about the causes of negative social reactions. Recent reviews are provided by Gurman (1986) and Bennett-Herbert and Dunkel-Schetter (1992). There are victim factors, factors of social network members and societal factors. Among the victim factors, victim's distress and depression and victim's lack of appropriate coping have been demonstrated as being influential. Both in experimental and in field studies it has been shown that distressed and depressed people are more likely to be rated as unattractive, and are more likely to be derogated and rejected. This is true across various categories of victims and respondents. As Silver, Wortman, and Crofton (1990) demonstrated with cancer patients, respondents seem to have standards for the expression of distress and depression, and deviations from these standards in either direction are criticized. There are also standards for time periods during which sadness or distress will be considered adequate. It is for this reason that many bereaved people receive emotional support for a certain period following the death of a loved one. At the end of this normative duration of mourning, the feedback they get is more and more often that now it is time to look forward, to look for the positive sides of life, to stop the mourning, and so on. The message is that continuing sadness is not normal, that it is deviant. Winer, Bonner, Blaney, and Murray (1981) demonstrated that there were more negative reactions when the depressed did not show signs of improvement between the first and the second contact.

Concerning the social network members we need to know what motivates their negative reactions. Avoiding contact with victims may be due to helplessness vis à vis the victim or to being embarrassed by empathic suffering with the victim. Quite often, blaming and derogating the victim may be explained by referring to one of the above mentioned motives: trying to preserve the belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980) and/or the belief in having control over one's fate (Shaver, 1970; Walster, 1966).

Attributing responsibility to the victim by assuming that the "misfortune" was self-inflicted helps the observer to avoid feelings of injustice since self-inflicted losses and hardships are by definition not unjust (stating injustice presupposes that others have caused the victimization). Quite a few studies demonstrate that belief in a just world (measured by Rubin and Peplau's scale, 1975, or by a scale developed in my group, cf. Dalbert, Montada, & Schmitt, 1987) is correlated with blaming victims for having self-inflicted their misfortune (Lerner, 1980), their illnesses, unemployment, or accidents (Maes & Montada, 1988), their unemployment or poverty (Montada & Schneider, 1989), their AIDS-infection (Montada & Figura, 1988).

Blaming the victim may also defend the belief in having control over one's life and the belief in invulnerability. It is positively correlated with respondents' optimism and their belief of being invulnerable, and it is negatively correlated with felt helplessness when thinking about life risks such as cancer, traffic accidents, or job loss (Maes & Montada, 1988). A scale to measure the individual strength of the motive to preserve control has recently been developed (Kordmann, 1991): The motive to preserve control was positively correlated with attributing responsibility to accident victims.

In summary, it may be stated that observers' views of (in-)justice and responsibilities are also subjective constructions which frequently are not objective but biased and motivated. They might be quite influential, however, in interactions with the victims. Whether social network members support the victims or whether they derogate, isolate, or blame them will depend on their frequently biased views about justice and responsibility.

**References**


