

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

J. SCOTT KENNEY, *Canadian Victims of Crime: Critical Insights*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc, 2009, ix + 267 p., index

For academics and general readers alike, the best qualitative sociology instills a sense of empathy (not necessarily sympathy) towards the lived experiences of those studied, and perhaps more significantly, a burgeoning reflexive awareness of one's own self and its association with others. J. Scott Kenney's book *Canadian Victims of Crime: Critical Insights* is highly successful in its unvarnished and empathetic examination of the experiences of crime victims, for its explication of the social contexts that help or hinder victims' experiences, as well as for attuning the reader's "awareness context" towards these social worlds. Its focus is on the micro interactional level of analysis, drawing from symbolic interactionism, social constructionism as well as criminological theory. Kenney fuses this analysis with a critical victimology which criticizes the organizational and systemic social forces that delimit the ability of victims to achieve a legitimated voice and access inroads to power within the criminal justice system. By "unvarnished," I do not suggest that the book sensationalizes the emotionally brutalizing experiences of victims' suffering (quite the opposite), though some of these experiences are documented. Rather, the book skillfully presents how the label "victim" is taken up, internalized as well as resisted, and how related "victim contests" are mediated through organizational and bureaucratic iron cages.

The book moves in a logical direction from introductory chapters which examine the impact of crime upon victims, the social dynamics and legal institutions involved, to a consideration of the role emotions play with respect to the victims' rights movement, policy responses to these movements (including a chapter focusing on restorative justice), and ends with a cultural comparison between Canada and Columbia. The intended readership for this book is ostensibly wide. The positive reviews on the back jacket suggest that the book is a "must read" for "anyone" with an interest in understanding the experiences of victims, as well as undergraduate students taking criminology and sociology courses. Canadian Scholars' Press has influenced the formatting of the book to favor the latter, with a detailed methodological account in the introduction, scholarly in-text citations, complete endnotes and references at the end of each chapter, as well as a detailed methodological appendix. In addition, frequent lengthy excerpts (in shaded boxes) from other relevant academic sources as well as the author's own work are employed throughout the text, offering a rich supplementary material that often helps to flesh out themes developed in the main stem. This formatting distinguishes the book from others that involve scholarly work but relegate academic references and notations to an appendix in order to render the body more readable for a general audience.

The book offers important insights and should be read widely. Insofar as the heart of the book features extensive quotations from victims in their own words, most general readers will likely skip or skim through the academic sections and still retain the insights clarified within the substantive chapters. However my own view is that the book's most important readers are both "victims" of crime (both those who do and do not identify with the label) as well as the officials and social workers involved in victims' programs. Kenney also stresses that particular insights may have interest for "support groups, victims' organizations, and counsellors" (76).

It would undoubtedly be a marketing faux pas to place quotations around the word victim in the title of the book; yet it is Kenney's awareness of the ambiguity of the label and how it is "taken up" within interactional contexts that is the book's major strength. While conventional victimology makes objectivist assumptions regarding the victim identity of individuals and groups, Kenney places an emphasis upon the "interpretive, definitional process involved in constructing this reality status" (14). A question repeatedly asked by Kenney (not just rhetorically) is what constitutes a "real" victim? The strongest sections explicate how victims' varying definitions of the situation are affected by organizational contingencies and bureaucracy. This is especially evident in his chapter on policy responses, which underscores the ways in which victims' support officers, despite training, risk creating self-fulfilling prophecies by encouraging clients to identify as victims (152). Clients' reflections upon their interactions with support officers are instructive: "They told me I was a victim. I didn't know what to classify myself as before that"; "Initially I wouldn't say I saw myself as a victim until I realized what victim meant to many other people" (153). While some support staff encouraged those seeking their services to see themselves as victims ["They don't know that they're victims, but they are" (17)], others left it up to clients to draw their own conclusions.

Certain victims' services officers also felt constrained given "restrictions built around the traditional criminal process" (147) with respect to preparing victims for court proceedings and the formulation of victim impact statements. Officers felt pressured "to avoid encouraging further claims to victimhood and the presence of factors that did just that" (149). Kenney reveals a "curious paradox" involved with officers' attempts to "encourage empowerment in an institutional context where staff have little or no power themselves" (149). Too often the problem is that symbolism, i.e., token responses to present an appearance of responding to victims' needs, takes precedence over substantive outcomes or change (149). In addition, Kenney discusses examples of rifts within such organizations between clients who did not identify with the victim role, others who did, versus even more strident "professional victims." Despite such problems Kenney frequently discusses various factors that contribute to both positive and negative experiences on the part of victims as well as victims' services officers, producing a complex image of social worlds that refuses to over-simplify its intricacies.

The strongest theoretical contribution comes from Kenney's analysis (in a chapter co-authored with Karen Stanbridge) of the important role emotions play in victims' rights movements. Kenney posits that social movements theories,

which tend to focus upon political and cultural factors that propel victims' advocacy movements (such as resource mobilization), have inadvertently downplayed the role of emotions through responding to atomistic relative deprivation theories in psychology which failed to address sociological factors (113). Here too Kenney addresses organizational and political factors. Interestingly, tensions within victims' advocacy groups were split between the goals of therapy and action (128). Some members found their leaders too focused on impacting governmental changes and not enough on their own emotional needs (127).

Kenney makes reference to race and class, suggesting that the members of Canadian victims' organizations, as with those in the U.S., are largely white and middle-class (109). However it is gender that receives sustained attention. Each chapter includes either an explicit section focusing on gender or implicit references to gender effects that mediate victims' experiences. Kenney discusses areas where women and men differed in their experiences of victimization, including grief cycles, health effects, and how they coped. While women dealt more with fear and men anger, it is interesting to note that many more women than men put pressure on officials in legal institutions regarding their cases and became politically active in fighting for victims' rights (100).

Interestingly, Kenney is skeptical about the efforts of women's shelters to "empower" their clients, since, he argues, "efforts to downplay victimhood raises the question of whether this unintentionally results in its encouragement in another way" (164). Implicit in the strategy of empowerment, he argues, is a premise of helplessness that is associated with victimhood. The effect may be that new clients are "altercasted" as victims, despite not perceiving themselves as victims (or "empowered") beforehand (164). Kenney observed a "temporal pattern" that is strikingly dialectical, whereby clients come to women's shelters encouraged to view themselves as victims of abuse, and are subsequently motivated to dissociate themselves from this identity (165). The negative is first employed in order to reify self perception, facilitating its own breach; without the initial negative there comes no positive.

Despite a methodology that stresses both participant observation as well as key informant interviews (145), most chapters focus upon "monological" interviews which, despite their references to interactions and interactional dynamics, do not benefit from a sustained attention to interactions "in situ." The exception to this is the outstanding chapter (co-authored with Don Clairmont) on restorative justice conferences, which is set apart due to its detailed explication of interactions between victims, offenders and facilitators. This allows Kenney to explore the micro-interactional power plays that emerge as the "victim" label is subjected to continual permutations of action. Ethnographic analyses of restorative justice which explore the "interpersonal dynamics" of sessions are largely absent from the literature (173). Kenney's research is the first study of restorative justice in Canada to pay specific attention to these dynamics.

In addition to key factors such as facilitator training (198), Kenney insightfully argues that reintegrative and empathic experiences were facilitated within restorative justice sessions not through shaming but through the "enactment of

mutual feelings of victimization that mediates this relationship, potentially cutting an area of common ground for empathy to be strategically experienced” (189). The best case scenarios, therefore, occurred when the “victim role was expanded.” A facilitator commented at the end of one of these sessions, where both offenders and victims, as well as their supporters, expressed empathy for each other’s experiences: “It seems like we have five victims tonight” (191). Such “dialogic” analyses may have served to enhance observations in other areas of the book that rely more centrally upon “monological” interviews.

While the rich and nuanced qualitative data and the connections between “on-the-ground” experiences and organizational contingencies remain the book’s major strengths, there are some relatively minor issues with respect to the presentation of the material that mire an otherwise professionally rendered and academically rigorous work. Entire paragraphs and sections of paragraphs are repeated in the methodology section of the introduction from pages 2 and 5. This is likely due to the fact that the book draws from several studies which employ the same methodological procedures and approaches. Nevertheless, the chapter could be presented more concisely by presenting such methods once and then making reference to the various studies and how they differed, rather than repeating the same methodological procedures word-for-word within consecutive pages. In addition, an entire paragraph on page 7 is reproduced verbatim within the concluding chapter on page 228. While the conclusion certainly warrants a detailed recapitulation of the work presented in the book, it would have been preferable had this been employed through an abbreviated paraphrasing that would allow more space for a discussion of wider implications and applications.

Additionally, while making a notable argument for comparative research in a chapter (co-authored with Alfredo Schulte-Bockholt) comparing Canada and Columbia, the chapter seems “late to the show.” It lacks the micro-interactional explication of previous chapters, and presents several unconvincing points of similarity between these nations to argue that both exhibit “ideological obfuscation” (219) with respect to institutional arrangements that impact upon victims’ services. It seems, rather, as though the differences illuminated in the chapter (Columbia’s “rampant corruption, criminal infiltration, state repression, revolutionary movements [and] paramilitarism” (220) contrast sharply with Canada’s system) largely overshadow the similarities. Nevertheless, both points of similarity and contrast do justify the argument for comparative research, especially ethnographically-oriented work of the kind offered throughout Kenney’s book. Ideally these comparisons should be advanced in a future book that focuses strictly upon these issues.

Overall, Kenney seems skeptical about “whether it is possible that anything can be done within our current system” (166) to positively enhance victims’ experiences. The best efforts to respond to victims’ needs become quickly caught up within webs of organizational and institutional social forces that act to “hem in’ the exercise of human agency” (230). The ultimate research goal, he argues, should be the identification of “best practices” with a view to providing “better victim services for all” (238). Despite an analysis that refuses to “take a side” and answer the question of what constitutes a “real” victim, Kenney’s contribution is to imply that “best practices” should aim to consciously instill an initial

pragmatic identification with the victim role, which is subsequently overcome through a replacement discourse of survivor.

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