

Understanding Theories of Criminal Victimization

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Understanding Theories of Criminal Victimization

ABSTRACT

Current theories of victimization have generated a sizable body of empirical research, mostly within the last two decades. The two most widely known perspectives, lifestyle-exposure and routine activities theories, have been the object of much current thinking and empirical testing, but their maturation has been hampered by many of the same problems impeding theories of criminality. These include inadequate attention to variation by type of crime, compartmentalized thinking, poor links between theory and data, inadequate measures of key concepts, and failure to specify clearly functional relationships between sets of variables. Many of these problems can be addressed by closer examination of the interrelationships among victims, offenders, and criminal situations. Victimization theories should be incorporated into comprehensive integrated theories of crime.

Victimization theories are now a common feature of criminological work, but it has not always been so. In spite of their obvious appeal, perspectives on victim behavior have only recently gained sufficient scholarly respectability to join forces with the mainstay of the criminological arsenal, theories of offender behavior. Work that has incorporated victim perspectives, such as Wolfgang's (1958) research on homicide and especially Amir's (1971) related work on rape, encountered political difficulty because it appeared that the victim bore some responsibility for the crime. This was an idea that smacked of "blaming the victim," a cornerstone of liberal crime control ideology and some-

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thing to be avoided at all scholarly cost, even truth. But the impediments to a defensible notion of victim involvement in crime were more long-standing than this, and even relatively unenlightened criminologists must surely have known that no picture of predatory crime can ever be complete without information about the victim of these offenses. Only in the last two decades have victimization theories generated empirical, as well as anecdotal, support, most notably in the form of lifestyle-exposure (Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo 1978) and routine activities theories (Cohen and Felson 1979). This long road to respectability is hard to explain, but the high (or low) points can at least be identified.

In this essay, we argue that the current popularity of and support for victimization surveys is well deserved but that investigators must also consider the major limitations of the theoretical and empirical work that has been done on victimization. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a complete critique of victimization studies, we do note that much previous research has suffered from a number of problems, including the use of inadequate measures of key concepts, few statistical controls, and the absence of multilevel models and contextual effects that could provide alternative explanations for the results of victimization research. We also note that, while some versions of victimization theories suggest that victims and offenders are tied together in a broader social ecology of crime, these theories do not provide testable propositions about the conditions of offending and victimization to permit adequate predictions of crime. In spite of these problems, we are encouraged about the current status of victimization surveys.

We begin our analysis by examining the historical context of victimization theories in Section I. We also identify major sources of information concerning these theories, predominantly victimization surveys. Section II identifies major current theories of victimization with particular attention to lifestyle theories and routine activities theories. Alternative models of victimization are identified in Section III, and major concepts used in victimization theories are examined in Section IV with an eye toward improving conceptual clarity. Section V discusses what we consider to be major problems with victimization theories. The context of crime plays an important role in modeling victimization, and its effects are discussed in Section VI. We discuss the prospects of integrating theories of victimization with theories of criminality in Section VII. Conclusions are offered in Section VIII.

I. Historical Foundations for Current Victimization Theories

The use of such expressions as “the victim-offender problem” (MacDonald 1939), “the duet frame of crime” (Von Hentig 1948), “the penal couple” (Ellenberger 1955), and, more generally, “the victim-offender relationship” (Von Hentig 1940; Schafer 1968; Schultz 1968) clearly indicates the significance of crime victims to the understanding of crime. Garofalo (1914) was one of the first to note that a victim may provoke another into attack, whereas Mendelsohn (1956) developed a victim typology that distinguishes victims who are more culpable than their offenders from those who are considered totally guiltless. Von Hentig (1948) described general classes of crime victims (e.g., the young, females, the old, the mentally defective, the depressed, the acquisitive, the lonesome and heartbroken) and some of the characteristics associated with these personal attributes that increase their vulnerability to crime.

Such a list of phrases is not a history, and it would be incorrect to claim that modern victim theories are merely the latest variants in a long lineage of earlier victim theories. These early writers did not propose theories, and even some of the concepts they used were primitive. Furthermore, it is speculative at best to attempt to sketch a victim theory ancestry since there seem to be few connections among these early works. Although it is difficult to trace the origins of any particular theoretical perspective, two fairly recent research traditions appear to be the antecedents to current theories of victimization. These include research on victim precipitation and the development of victimization surveys.

A. *Victim Precipitation*

The first systematic study of victim involvement in crime was conducted in the late 1950s by Marvin Wolfgang. The term he introduced, “victim precipitation,” became a popular descriptor for all direct-contact predatory crime (e.g., murder, assault, forcible rape, robbery). When applied to homicide, victim precipitation is restricted to those cases in which “the victim is the first in the homicide drama to resort to physical force against the subsequent slayer” (Wolfgang 1958, p. 252; see also Wolfgang 1957). A similar definition is used in the case of aggravated assault except that insinuating language or gestures might also be considered provoking actions (Curtis 1974; Miethe 1985). Victim-precipitated robbery involves cases in which the victim has

acted without reasonable self-protection in the handling of money, jewelry, or other valuables (Normandeau 1968; Curtis 1974), whereas this concept in forcible rape applies to “an episode ending in forced sexual intercourse in which the victim first agreed to sexual relations, or clearly invited them verbally or through gestures, but then retracted before the act” (Amir 1967; Curtis 1974). Under each of these definitions, there is an explicit time ordering of events in which victims initiate some type of action that results in their subsequent victimization.

Previous studies using police reports suggest some level of victim involvement in a large proportion of violent crimes. The extent of victim precipitation, however, varies widely by type of offense. Estimates of victim precipitation range from 22 to 38 percent for homicide, 14 percent for aggravated assault, between 4 and 19 percent for rape cases, and about 11 percent of armed robberies are characterized by carelessness on the part of the victim (see, for review, Curtis 1974). These figures are best considered low estimates of the rate of victim involvement because of the fairly restrictive definition of victim precipitation for some crimes (i.e., murder, assault) and the large number of cases with incomplete information. The national survey of aggravated assaults reported by Curtis (1974), for example, had insufficient data for determining the presence of victim precipitation in 51 percent of the cases. Nonetheless, the importance of the notion of victim precipitation is clearly revealed in many cases of homicide where who becomes labeled the victim and who the offender (Wolfgang 1957) is a matter of chance or circumstance.

There are several reasons why previous research on victim-precipitated crime was influential in the emergence of current theories of victimization. First, the prevalence of victim precipitation signified the importance of victims' actions in explaining violent crime but also brought attention to the less direct ways by which citizens contribute to their victimization. These less direct forms of victim involvement would include such acts as getting involved in risky or vulnerable situations, not exercising good judgment when in public places, leaving property unprotected, and interacting on a regular basis with potential offenders.

Second, the notion of victim precipitation, by definition, attributes some responsibility for crime to the actions of its victims. That victim-precipitation researchers had to deal directly with such an unpopular

public and political stance may have made it easier for subsequent scholars to examine victim culpability and how the routine activities and lifestyles of citizens provide opportunities for crime. Thus, current theories of victimization may have benefited greatly from the prior work on victim precipitation.

The implication of blame in victim-precipitation analyses has inhibited full development of the concept. When Wolfgang's student Menachim Amir (1971) adopted the concept in a study of forcible rape that parallels Wolfgang's research on homicide, it caused a major political controversy. Amir, like Wolfgang, used official police reports in the city of Philadelphia; he also used the subculture of violence as a unifying theoretical notion to explain this crime. But Amir was not sufficiently sensitive to the differences between murder and rape in using the idea of victim precipitation. While it is neither counterintuitive nor politically contentious to acknowledge that murder victims sometimes strike the first blow or otherwise provoke a violent response, it was politically aberrant to suggest that rape victims were provocative, at least in the same sense. In suggesting the nature of victim precipitation in rape, Amir reported that 20 percent of the victims had a prior record for some sort of sexual misconduct (usually prostitution or juvenile intercourse) and another 20 percent had "bad reputations." Wolfgang's research offered a promising idea to further explore the relationship between offender and victim, but Amir's study blunted the promise by not developing the idea beyond Wolfgang's pioneering work.

Actually, Amir was either too far ahead, or too far behind, his times. The 1970s were politically charged in criminology as well as in society at large with much concern about victim blaming and women's rights. Research on rape would shortly be done correctly only by women. The idea that men had anything reasonably objective to say about rape was not given much credence. Surely this overstates the matter, but there is no mistaking the fact that there were very few male authors on rape, and Amir himself took an academic assignment in Israel never really to publish on rape again. The concept of victim precipitation remained comatose under the feminist assault never to resurface, even for homicide.

In fairness, the concept of victim precipitation was never really defined very well, and Amir's application of the concept to include "bad reputation" was a serious mistake scientifically. Such an indicator clearly smacked of subjectivity, and no validity checks were made of

the Philadelphia Police Department records in which this phrase appeared.

B. Victimization Surveys

The second major contributor to the emergence of current victimization theories is the development of large-scale victimization surveys. Prior to the advent of victimization surveys in the late 1960s and early 1970s, official reports on crimes known to the police and self-reports of offending were the only systematically available data on criminal activities. However, neither of these sources give any systematic information about the actions and characteristics of crime victims. Although it is possible to understand crime without directly surveying its victims (e.g., by interviewing offenders about their choice of crime sites, doing observation studies of areas with high rates of crime), victim surveys provide information about aspects of the criminal event that is not routinely collected from other sources.

There were three early studies: one by Reiss of business victimization; Biderman's study in Washington, D.C.; and Ennis's survey through the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) (President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice 1967, pp. 38–43). These surveys, thoroughly reviewed by Sparks (1982), paved the way for more systematic studies. Of these initial efforts, one deserves more than passing comment.

The first national project was sponsored by the President's (Lyndon Johnson) Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice. The report was published in the commission proceedings the following year, and the findings were startling even to criminologists, let alone citizens (Ennis 1967). This first systematic survey of victims used a probability sample of nearly ten thousand households. The major conclusions included the findings that forcible rape was three and a half times more frequent than the reported rate, burglaries were three times the reported rate, and robbery was 50 percent higher than the reported rate. Thus, not only were most crimes underreported to a significant degree, the extent of underreporting varied from crime to crime. This meant that official estimates of crimes were not only "off" by some factor but that the degree to which they were off was variable and could not be estimated without separate surveys for each crime category.

The largest current victimization survey, the National Crime Vic-

timization Survey (NCS), involves yearly reports based on surveys of from between 59,000 and 72,000 U.S. households in which questions are asked to identify personal attributes of crime victims and characteristics of the offense. The interviews are conducted by Bureau of the Census personnel, and the results are coordinated by the Department of Justice. Actually, the NCS is a series of surveys rather than a survey at a single point in time. The NCS series involves probability samples of households that are interviewed a maximum of seven times at six-month intervals. Started in 1973, the NCS series involves interviews with persons over twelve years of age. Persons who move out of a household are not followed to their new address, but, if a new family or person moves into a sampled housing unit between waves, they are interviewed as part of the series. Skogan (1990) outlines the major changes in the implementation of the NCS series.

Even at their earlier stages of development, victimization surveys addressed fundamental questions about crime. Victim surveys represent an alternative barometer of the extent and distribution of crime. They also identify factors associated with reporting crime to the authorities, and they yield detailed information about the consequences of crime for the victim. For present purposes, however, the major contribution of victimization surveys is that they provide detailed information about the ecology of crime (e.g., where it occurred, type of injury, victim-offender relationship) and about the demographic characteristics of victims. It is the distribution of crime and the characteristics of victims identified in victimization surveys that are the social facts to be explained by current theories of victimization.

II. Current Major Theories of Victimization

Like theories of the behavior of criminals, theories of the behavior of crime victims are many and variable. Some, like the notion of victim precipitation, are little more than an idea, let alone a scientific concept. Others either are little more than victim typologies (Von Hentig 1948; Mendelsohn 1956) or highlight the distribution and characteristics of individuals who have repeat or multiple victimization experiences (Nelson 1980; Gottfredson 1981; Sparks 1981; Skogan 1990). Two major theories considered here are more sophisticated and have been the object of substantial empirical testing. The two most advanced theories are the lifestyle-exposure perspective and the routine activities theory.

There are points of conceptual and explanatory overlap between them, but they each offer a distinctive view of the role of victims in the crime process.

A. Lifestyle-Exposure Theories of Victimization

One of the first systematic theories of criminal victimization was the lifestyle-exposure approach developed by Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo (1978) less than twenty years ago. This theory was originally proposed to account for differences in the risks of violent victimization across social groups, but it has been extended to include property crime, and it forms the basis for more elaborate theories of target-selection processes.

The basic premise underlying the lifestyle-exposure theory is  demographic differences in the likelihood of victimization are attributed to differences in the personal lifestyles of victims. Variations in lifestyles are important because they are related to the differential exposure to dangerous places, times, and others—that is, situations in which there are high risks of victimization. A graphic representation of this theoretical perspective is presented in figure 1.

From this perspective, an individual's lifestyle is the critical factor that determines risks of criminal victimization. Lifestyle is defined in this context as “routine daily activities, both vocational activities (work, school, keeping house, etc.) and leisure activities” (Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo 1978, p. 241). People's daily activities may naturally bring them into contact with crime, or they merely increase the risk of crime that victims experience. Time spent in one's home generally decreases victim risk, while time spent in public settings increases risk.

Differences in lifestyles are socially determined by individuals' collective responses or adaptations to various role expectations and structural constraints (see fig. 1). Both ascribed and achieved status characteristics (e.g., age, gender, race, income, marital status, education, occupation) are important correlates of predatory crime because these status attributes carry with them shared expectations about appropriate behavior and structural obstacles that both enable and constrain one's behavioral choices. Adherence to these cultural and structural expectations leads to the establishment of routine activities patterns and associations with others similarly situated. These lifestyles and associations, in turn, are expected to enhance one's exposure to risky or vulnerable situations that increase individuals' chances of victimization. Several

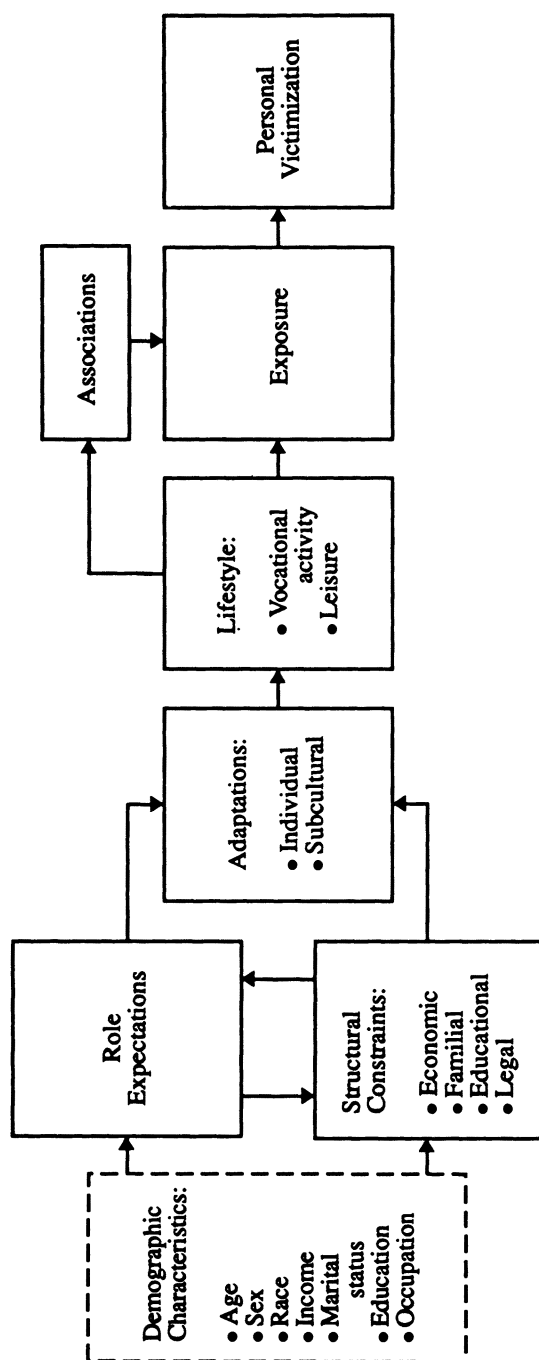


Fig. 1.—A lifestyle-exposure model of victimization. Source: adapted from Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo (1978)

examples should clarify the basic logic underlying this lifestyle-exposure model.

1. *Gender.* Despite major efforts to promote gender equality in American society, there remain fundamental differences in role expectations and structural opportunities for men and women. Gender stereotyping results in gender differences in such basic activities as where and with whom time is spent, the degree of supervision in daily activities, the likelihood of having contact with strangers, and exposure to risky and dangerous public places. For example, females spend a greater proportion of their time inside the home because as adolescents they are more closely supervised than males, and as adults they are more likely to assume housekeeping and child-rearing responsibilities (Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo 1978). Greater familial responsibilities and the systematic denial of educational and economic opportunities may severely impede women's participation in public life. Furthermore, even when engaged in public activity, women's routine activities are more likely to take place in the presence of friends and intimate others than in isolation. These role expectations and structural impediments are assumed to increase private domestic activities among women, increase supervision of their public behavior, decrease their exposure to high-risk persons and places, and subsequently decrease their relative risks of criminal victimization. Males, by contrast, are traditionally socialized to be active in the public domain, assertive and aggressive in social situations, have fewer restrictions on their daily lives, and spend more time away from a protective home environment. Accordingly, gender differences in traditional lifestyles are said partly to explain the higher victimization risks of men.

2. *Income.* Another strong determinant of lifestyle and exposure to crime is economic resources, such as income. As a fundamental aspect of stratification, income determines whether structural conditions either enable or constrain various aspects of social life. Low income severely restricts one's choices in regard to housing, transportation, associations with others, and leisure activities. Individuals' abilities to move out of crime-prone environments, live in apartments or homes with elaborate security measures (e.g., security guards, video surveillance, burglar alarms), avoid contact with potential offenders, and undertake leisure activities in safer areas are limited when living under conditions of economic deprivation. As family income increases, there is greater flexibility to adjust one's lifestyle to select the area in which to live, the mode of transportation for daily activities, the amount of

time spent in private versus public places, and the type of leisure activities (Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo 1978). The greater choices afforded persons with higher economic resources allow them to more easily avoid risky and vulnerable situations. Thus, by patterning the nature of social life, income is a lifestyle characteristic that is expected to lead to differential risks of victimization.

3. *Empirical Predictions.* From a lifestyle-exposure perspective, differences in risks of violent victimization by gender, high-income, and other status characteristics are attributed to differences in lifestyles that increase individuals' exposure to risky and vulnerable situations. Given that victimization risks are not uniformly distributed across time and space, lifestyles are assumed to affect the probability of victimization because different lifestyles are associated with differential risks of being in particular places, at particular times, under particular circumstances, and interacting with particular kinds of persons. Accordingly, persons who are younger, male, not married, low income, and black should have higher risks of violent victimization than their counterparts because each group is said to engage in more public activity (especially at night), spend less time with family members, or associate more frequently with persons who have offender characteristics. Under this theoretical model, individuals' risks of property victimization should also be higher among those social groups (e.g., young, male, single persons) who spend more time engaged in public activity because such persons would be less able to protect their dwelling from crime.

If a lifestyle-exposure theory is an adequate explanation for differential risks of predatory victimization, several outcomes would be expected. First, if demographic differences in victimization risks are due to differences in lifestyles and routine activities, the impact of each demographic variable (e.g., age, gender, race, social class) should decrease in importance once separate measures of lifestyles and routine activities are included as control variables. Second, persons with the configuration of status characteristics commonly recognized as having the most vulnerable lifestyles (i.e., young, single, low-income, black males) should have a greater risk of victimization than any other configuration, and their exact opposites (i.e., older, married, high-income, white females) should have the lowest relative risks. Third, given increases in efforts to promote gender and racial equality in all institutional domains over the last two decades, differences in victimization risks by these factors should decrease over time. In other words, smaller differences in victimization risks by gender and race would be

expected over time if there were fewer group-specific role expectations and fewer structural obstacles that impede the life chances of persons within each of these groups.

While these hypotheses from lifestyle-exposure theories are relatively straightforward, they have not been adequately examined. In fact, only the first hypothesis has been examined empirically. The results of previous research (Miethe, Stafford, and Long 1987; Kennedy and Forde 1990) indicate that some demographic differences in victim risks (e.g., gender and age differences) can be attributed to differences in individuals' routine activities and lifestyles. Differences in victimization risks by configuration of status characteristics or changes over time in demographic predictors of victimization risks have not been investigated.

B. Routine Activity Theory

The routine activity perspective developed by Cohen and Felson (1979) has many similarities with the lifestyle-exposure theory. Both emphasize how patterns of routine activities or lifestyles in conventional society provide an opportunity structure for crime. Each theory also downplays the importance of offender motivation and other aspects of criminality in understanding individuals' risks of victimization and the social ecology of crime. These theories are also representative of a wider "criminal opportunity" perspective because they stress how the availability of criminal opportunities is determined, in large part, by the routine activity patterns of everyday life (Cohen 1981; Cohen and Land 1987). The fundamental differences between these theories are in terminology and in the fact that routine activity theory was originally developed to account for changes in crime rates over time whereas lifestyle-exposure theory was proposed to account for differences in victimization risks across social groups. Over the past decade, however, each theory has been applied across units of analysis and in both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs.

According to Cohen and Felson (1979, p. 589), structural changes in routine activity patterns influence crime rates by affecting the convergence in time and space of three elements of direct-contact predatory crimes: motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians against a violation. As necessary elements, the lack of any of these conditions is sufficient to prevent criminal activity. Furthermore, Cohen and Felson (1979) note that increases in crime rates could occur without any increase in the structural conditions that

motivate offenders to engage in crime as long as there has been an increase in the supply of attractive and unguarded targets for victimization. Their argument about how crime rates can increase even if offender motivation remains constant is important because it allows them to account for the apparent contradiction underlying most theories of criminality that crime rates continued to rise throughout the 1960s and 1970s in the United States even though conditions that foster criminality (e.g., unemployment, racial segregation, economic inequality) were decreasing.

From this perspective, routine activities are defined as “any recurrent and prevalent activities that provide for basic population and individual needs” (Cohen and Felson 1979, p. 593). Similar to the notion of lifestyle, these routine activities include formalized work, leisure, and the ways by which humans acquire food, shelter, and other basic needs or desires (e.g., companionship, sexual expression). Drawing from work in human ecology (e.g., Hawley 1950), Cohen and Felson (1979) argue that humans are located in ecological niches with a particular tempo, pace, and rhythm in which predatory crime is a way of securing these basic needs or desires at the expense of others. Potential victims in this environment are likely to alter their daily habits and take evasive actions that may persuade offenders to seek alternative targets. It is under such predatory conditions that the routine activities of potential victims are said both to enhance and to restrict the opportunities for crime.

1. *Social Change and Routine Activities.* The basic premise underlying routine activity theory is that various social changes in conventional society increase criminal opportunities. For example, given the assorted costs for stealing items with great weight (e.g., their theft requires more physical energy, they are harder to conceal), it is not surprising that burglars are most attracted to items that are easily portable and have high resale value (e.g., cash, jewelry, electronic equipment). Accordingly, any changes in manufacturing or production activities that decrease the size or increase the demand for expensive durable goods (e.g., televisions, tape decks, VCRs, home computers, compact disk players) are expected to increase the attractiveness of these goods for victimization. Similarly, increases over time in the level of safety precautions taken by the public would apparently decrease crime rates by reducing the accessibility of potential crime targets to would-be offenders. Such changes, of course, might also result in alternative outcomes such as no net reduction in crime rates because crime

is being displaced to other objects, victims, or times depending on the structural conditions.

Of the various social changes in routine activities that have occurred over the last four decades, Lawrence Cohen, Marcus Felson, and their colleagues have placed primary importance on changes in sustenance and leisure activities away from domestic life and family-based living arrangements. A basic proposition underlying this theory is that any decrease in the concentration of activities within family-based households will increase crime rates (Cohen and Land 1987). There are several ways by which such social changes are assumed to increase criminal opportunities. First, a rise in single-person households or households consisting of unrelated persons requires a greater supply of durable consumer goods and other merchandise that are considered attractive property to steal. Such a duplication of consumer goods is unnecessary in family-like living arrangements. Second, increases in nonfamilial activities and households decrease the level of personal guardianship over others. The mere presence of a spouse, child, or other relative in a household provides greater protection for individuals and their property than is true of persons who live alone, and living with other relatives also increases the likelihood that public activities will be undertaken in groups. Third, increases in nonfamily households alter the location of routine activities from a private domain to a public domain, thereby also increasing one's exposure to risky and vulnerable situations. Thus, changes in domestic activities and living arrangements may increase the supply of attractive crime targets, decrease the level of guardianship, and consequently increase criminal opportunities.

Although applicable to various social science disciplines, there are several reasons why routine activity theory is especially attractive to sociologists. First, this theoretical approach clearly highlights the symbiotic relationship between conventional and illegal activity patterns. Illegal activities are presumed to "feed on" the routine activities of everyday life (Felson and Cohen 1980; Messner and Blau 1987). Second, this theory identifies a fundamental irony between constructive social change and crime rates. Specifically, many social changes that have improved both the quality and equality of social life in the United States (e.g., increased labor force participation and educational attainment among women, increases in out-of-home leisure activities) are the same factors predicted to increase rates of predatory crime. Third, both routine activity and lifestyle-exposure theory attempt to explain

crime, not in the actions or numbers of motivated offenders, but in the activities and lifestyles of potential victims. Accordingly, these approaches have more relevance to a wider range of sociologists than most theories because they ignore the sources of criminal motivation and other major topics in traditional criminology (i.e., you do not have to be a criminologist to understand these theories) and direct attention to how the habits, lifestyles, and behavioral patterns of ordinary citizens in their daily lives create an environment for predatory crime.

2. *Applying Routine Activities.* Over the last decade, routine activity theory has been used to explain aggregate rates and individuals' risks of victimization, changes in crime rates over time, and the social ecology of crime. Each of these applications focuses on how the nature of nonhousehold activity influences one's exposure to crime. For example, Cohen and Felson (1979) examine the relationship between crime rates and the "household activity ratio" (i.e., the sum of the number of married female labor force participants and the number of nonhusband/nonwife households divided by the total number of households). Felson and Cohen (1980) investigate the impact of increases in the rate of primary households on increasing burglary rates over time. Arguing that high rates of unemployment lead to decreases in nonhousehold activity, Cohen, Felson, and Land (1980) also apply this approach to study how unemployment rates and the household activity ratio influence temporal changes in rates of robbery, burglary, and automobile theft. Messner and Blau (1987) examine the relationship between crime rates for standard metropolitan statistical areas (SMSAs) in the United States and measures of the volume of household activity (i.e., size of television viewing audience) and nonhousehold activity (i.e., the supply of sport and entertainment establishments). Miethe, Hughes, and McDowall (1991) use this perspective to examine how measures of guardianship, nonhousehold activity, and target attractiveness influence offense-specific crime rates and changes in crime rates in 584 U.S. cities for the three decades from 1960 to 1980. Finally, Messner and Tardiff (1985) apply routine activity theory to examine the social ecology of urban homicide.

Most previous studies using the individual or household as the unit of analysis can be interpreted as tests of both routine activity and lifestyle-exposure theories. Cohen and Cantor (1980), for example, examine how characteristics of individuals and their lifestyles (e.g., income, age, race, major daily activity, household size) influence risks of residential burglary and personal larceny. Cohen, Kluegel, and Land

(1981) evaluate whether measures of exposure, guardianship, proximity to motivated offenders, and target attractiveness mediate the impact of income, race, and age on individuals' risks of predatory victimization. The impact of measures of nonhousehold activity, target suitability, and guardianship on individuals' risks of victimization has also been examined in other studies (e.g., Clarke et al. 1985; Lynch 1987; Maxfield 1987; Miethe, Stafford, and Long 1987; Sampson and Wooldredge 1987; Massey, Krohn, and Bonati 1989; Kennedy and Forde 1990). In the only study that uses longitudinal data on individuals, Miethe, Stafford, and Sloane (1990) explore the interrelationships between changes in the level of nonhousehold activity, guardianship patterns, and temporal changes in individuals' risks of personal and property victimization. The utility of this theoretical formulation for predicting multiple victimizations was also suggested by other researchers (Gottfredson 1981; Sparks 1981).

3. *Empirical Predictions.* Although studies vary widely in terms of their units of analysis and measurement of key concepts, the predictive validity of routine activity theory rests ultimately on the empirical observation of three outcomes. First, routine activity patterns that indicate greater levels of nonhousehold activity should increase individuals' risks and aggregate rates of predatory crime by increasing potential victims' visibility and accessibility as crime targets. Second, routine activity patterns that indicate higher levels of self-protection or guardianship should decrease individuals' risks and aggregate rates of predatory crime. Third, persons and property with higher subjective or material value to offenders should have higher risks of victimization than less attractive crime targets. Taken together, a routine activity approach predicts the greatest risks for predatory crime when potential victims have high target suitability (i.e., high visibility, accessibility, and attractiveness) and low levels of guardianship.

III. Alternative Theoretical Models

Lifestyle-exposure and routine activity theories have been the most widely applied perspectives to account for individuals' risks and aggregate rates of criminal victimization. However, other work has attempted to integrate these perspectives more directly, derive a clearer conceptual framework for explaining the process of target selection, and examine the context-specific effects of routine activities and lifestyles on risks of criminal victimization.

A. A Structural-Choice Model of Victimization

Miethe and Meier (1990) examined the feasibility of integrating routine activity and lifestyle-exposure theories into what is called a “structural-choice” theory of victimization. Consistent with other work (Cohen, Kluegel, and Land 1981), we argued that current theories of victimization highlight the importance of physical proximity to motivated offenders, exposure to high-risk environments, target attractiveness, and the absence of guardianship as necessary conditions for predatory crime.

Two central propositions were derived from routine activity and lifestyle-exposure theories. First, routine activity patterns and lifestyles each contribute to the creation of a criminal opportunity structure by enhancing the contact between potential offenders and victims. Second, the subjective value of a person or object and its level of guardianship determine the choice of the particular crime target. In combination, these propositions imply that “routine activities may predispose some persons and their property to greater risks, but the selection of a particular crime victim within a sociospatial context is determined by the expected utility of one target over another” (Miethe and Meier 1990, p. 245). Under this revised theoretical model, proximity and exposure are considered “structural” features (because they pattern the nature of social interaction and predispose individuals to riskier situations), whereas attractiveness and guardianship represent the “choice” component (because they determine the selection of the particular crime target within a sociospatial context).

There are several reasons why this “structural-choice” model may be a useful integration of current victimization theories. First, the revised model emphasizes both macrodynamic forces that contribute to a criminal opportunity structure (as identified by routine activity theory) and microlevel processes that determine the selection of particular crime victims (as implied by lifestyle-exposure theory).

Second, the structural-choice model retains the view that exposure, proximity, attractiveness, and guardianship are necessary conditions for victimization, meaning that the absence of any of these factors is sufficient to eliminate predatory crime.

Third, the structural-choice model follows closely the distinction between “predisposing” and “precipitating” factors. Specifically, both characterizations assume that living in particular environments increases one’s exposure and proximity to dangerous situations, but

whether a person becomes a crime victim depends on their presumed subjective utility over alternative targets.

Fourth, the structural-choice perspective emphasizes the context-specific effects of routine activities and lifestyles on risks of predatory crime. For example, target attractiveness and guardianship may have little impact on victimization risks for residents of areas with a low criminal opportunity structure because, by definition, such environments are not conducive to predatory crime in the first place. Alternatively, geographical areas with a high concentration of offenders may have such a high criminal opportunity structure that all residents, regardless of their perceived attractiveness or level of guardianship, are equally susceptible to criminal victimization.

B. Conceptualizing Target-Selection Processes

Both routine activity and lifestyle-exposure theories are designed to explain crime rates and why particular groups of individuals have higher risks of victimization than others. Differences in victimization risks for different demographic groups (e.g., males, young persons, nonwhites, the low income) are attributed to differences in lifestyles and routine activities that enhance persons' exposure to risky times, places, and potential offenders. However, neither of these approaches develops an adequate microlevel theory to account for the selection of particular crime targets within a particular sociospatial context. This is the case because both theories pay little attention to factors associated with criminality and offender motivation. Offender motivation is either assumed to be constant or there is no explicit reference to what motivates people to commit crime (Cohen and Land 1987).

A closer examination of these theories, however, reveals two specific images of criminality. First, an implicit assumption underlying these criminal opportunity theories is that offender motivation is at least partially caused by the lack of external physical restraints. Criminal intentions are translated into actions when there is a suitable person or object for victimization and "an absence of ordinary physical restraints such as the presence of other people or objects that inhibit, or are perceived to inhibit, the successful completion of direct contact predatory crime" (Cohen and Land 1987, p. 51). In this image, offenders are in some sense constantly motivated to commit crimes, and crime is explained only in mechanisms of restraint (Hirschi 1969). Second, offenders are assumed to make choices, no matter how rudimentary, in the selection of targets for victimization. It is this rational conception

of criminal behavior underlying current victimization theories that, in our opinion, offers the most promise in explaining target-selection processes.

From the perspective of a “reasoning criminal” (Cornish and Clarke 1986), offenders seek to benefit themselves by their criminal behavior and select victims who offer a high payoff with little effort or risk of detection. The decision to get involved in crime and the subsequent choice of particular crime victims are influenced by the constraints of time, ability, energy, limited information, and the availability of alternatives, both conventional and unconventional. Nonetheless, it is hardly outrageous to assume that most offenders engage in some level of planning and foresight and adapt their behavior to take into account situational contingencies (Cornish and Clarke 1986). Through the selective filtering and processing of information, the rational offender is said to select from a pool of potential victims those targets that are thought to offer the greatest net rewards.

Interviews with convicted offenders reveal that many personal and situational factors are considered in the selection of crime targets. Burglars, for example, report that the risks of detection (i.e., the likelihood of getting caught), the potential yield or reward, and the relative ease with which the home can be entered are the critical factors in selecting targets for victimization (Bennett and Wright 1985). Similar aspects of the physical environment and victim characteristics are considered by other offenders (e.g., robbers, muggers) when selecting crime targets (Cornish and Clarke 1986).

Hough (1987) has developed a conceptual framework for explaining target selection that clarifies the importance of routine activities and lifestyles in this process. According to Hough (1987, p. 359), this revised conceptual scheme takes it as axiomatic that, if members of one group are selected as crime targets more frequently than another, they must meet at least one of three conditions: they must be exposed more frequently to motivated offenders (proximity), be more attractive as targets in that they afford a better “yield” to the offender (reward), or be more attractive in that they are more accessible or less defended against victimization (absence of capable guardians). This theoretical approach is diagrammed in figure 2. The virtue of this perspective for understanding criminal victimization is that it clearly states that differences in proximity, attractiveness, or guardianship can account for differences in individuals’ risks of victimization and that persons who possess each of these characteristics are especially vulnerable to crime.

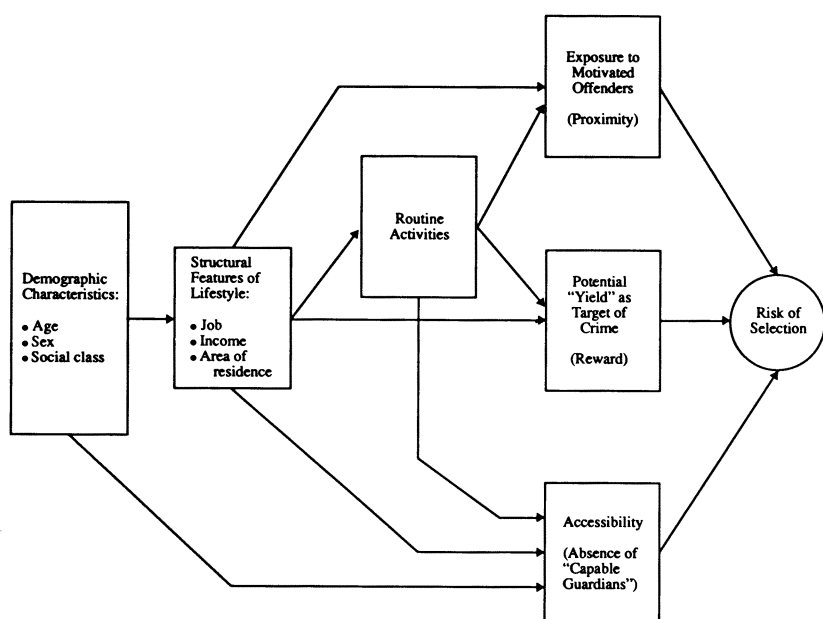


FIG. 2.—A target-selection model. Source: adapted from Hough (1987)

Consistent with both routine activity and lifestyle-exposure theory, these differences in target-selection factors are determined by individuals' routine activities and lifestyles.

Although a model that incorporates both structural and choice elements clarifies the role of routine activities and lifestyles in target-selection processes, the model is still limited in several respects. First, while it is reasonable to predict that criminal victimization is most likely under conditions of proximity, reward, and no guardianship, the model does not specify which factor is most important. Second, while interviews with convicted offenders suggest that target-selection factors may vary widely for different types of predatory crime (Bennett and Wright 1985; Carroll and Weaver 1986; Cornish and Clarke 1986; Feeney 1986; Walsh 1986), the model does not capture these crime-specific differences. Third, even within particular types of crime (e.g., among muggers), there appear to be major differences in factors associated with target selection, such as those found between novice and seasoned offenders (Cornish and Clarke 1986). These within-crime differences are also not directly incorporated in the revised model. Nonetheless, the conceptual framework outlined by Hough (1987) is a major

improvement over the original formulations of routine activity and lifestyle theories.

IV. Major Concepts in Victimization Theories

Although the terminology differs across studies, the central concepts underlying theories of victimization are essentially the same: proximity to crime, exposure, target attractiveness, and guardianship. Indeed, the major difference among victimization theories is the extent to which these concepts are interrelated.

A. Proximity to Crime

Physical proximity to high-crime areas is a major factor that increases victim risk. Proximity is best represented as the physical distance between areas where potential targets of crime reside and areas where relatively large populations of potential offenders are found (Cohen, Kluegel, and Land 1981, p. 507). Living in a high-crime area increases the likelihood of frequent contact with offenders and thus increases one's risks of victimization. That persons spend a majority of their time around the home and that offenders tend to select victims in close proximity to their residences (Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo 1978) further increase the adverse consequences of living in a high-crime area.

Both theories of criminality and research in the spatial ecology of crime identify characteristics of high-crime areas. Macrosociological theories of criminality (e.g., social disorganization, anomie, differential social organization) suggest that high-crime geographical areas have high levels of population turnover, ethnic heterogeneity, and low socioeconomic status. However, the work on deviant places and "hot spots" (Stark 1987; Sherman, Gartin, and Buerger 1989) indicates that even within a large geographical area with a high crime rate (e.g., neighborhood, subdivision, a side of town) there is variation in the amount of crime. From this perspective, some places (e.g., bars, convenience stores, adult bookstores, apartment complexes) are more dangerous than others because they attract people for whom crime is more likely, provide more targets for victimization, and have a diminished capacity for social control. Living near major transportation arteries, fast-food restaurants, bus stops, schools, and other places that attract larger numbers of strangers would also increase one's vulnerability to crime for similar reasons.

Common measures of physical proximity used in previous research

include place of residence (e.g., rural or urban resident), socioeconomic characteristics of the area (e.g., income level, unemployment rate, racial composition), and the perceived safety of the immediate neighborhood (Cohen, Kluegel, and Land 1981; Hough 1987; Lynch 1987; Sampson and Wooldredge 1987). The average rate of offending in an individual's immediate neighborhood is probably the best single indicator of proximity, but self-report or official measures of offending are rarely available at the neighborhood level of observation. Studies using the British Crime Survey (Sampson and Wooldredge 1987; Miethe and Meier 1990) are notable exceptions. As discussed shortly, the absence of multilevel research designs in a variety of settings has been a major limitation in previous research and has limited the development of measures of offending rates in models of victimization risks.

There is substantial empirical support for the relationship between proximity and increased risks of victimization. For example, we found in our study of British residents (Miethe and Meier 1990) that persons who lived in inner-city areas perceived their neighborhoods to be unsafe at night and that persons who lived in areas with higher levels of offending had higher risks of burglary, personal theft, and assault victimization. Using a seven-category variable based on the income of neighborhoods and urban-rural residence, Cohen, Kluegel, and Land (1981) found that persons who lived in central cities and low-income areas had higher risks of assault, burglary, and personal larceny than persons who live in other types of areas. Given high levels of residential segregation in the United States based on status characteristics, the observed association between particular demographic factors (e.g., low income, being single, being nonwhite, high residential mobility) and individuals' risks of victimization may also be attributed to the proximity of these social groups to pools of motivated offenders (Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo 1978; Smith and Jarjoura 1989). However, as discussed below, it is important to note that such findings are also consistent with other major components of victimization theories.

B. Exposure to Crime

While proximity reflects the physical distance between large numbers of offenders and victims, "exposure to crime" is indicative of one's vulnerability to crime (Cohen, Kluegel, and Land 1981). A building or dwelling has higher exposure to burglary if it is detached from other units, has multiple points of entry, and is located on a corner lot. Persons are exposed to higher risks of personal theft and assault when

placed in risky or vulnerable situations at particular times, under particular circumstances, and with particular kinds of persons. Usually, such exposure can result from the routine activities and lifestyles of persons. For example, risks of personal victimization are assumed to be directly related to the amount of time spend in public places (e.g., streets, parks) and, especially, public places at night (Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo 1978, p. 251). Furthermore, frequent contact with drinking establishments, bus depots, public transit, convenience stores, shopping malls, and other dangerous public places also increases one's exposure to crime (Sherman, Gartin, and Buerger 1989).

Exposure has usually been measured in terms of the level and nature of nonhousehold activity. One such common measure is the individual's primary daily activity (e.g. Cohen and Cantor 1980, 1981; Cohen, Kluegel, and Land 1981). Persons who are employed or are in school have greater exposure to crime because they spend more time away from home and they are more often in public places. More detailed indicators of this concept include the average number of evenings per week spent outside the home for leisure activities and the average number of hours per week the dwelling is unoccupied during the day or night (Sampson and Wooldredge 1987; Massey, Krohn, and Bonati 1989). When applied to the study of crime rates, measures of exposure have included the household activity ratio (Cohen and Felson 1979) and aggregate rates of television viewing, the supply of entertainment establishments (e.g., commercial cinemas, profit-making sport activities, opera and symphony orchestra companies), public transportation, female labor force participation, and retail sales from eating and drinking establishments.

Increases in nonhousehold activity are associated with higher crime rates in some studies (e.g., Cohen and Felson 1979; Felson and Cohen 1980; Cohen, Kluegel, and Land 1981) but not in others (Miethe, Hughes, and McDowall 1991). Increases in individuals' level of daytime and nighttime activity outside the home over time do not necessarily lead to increased risks of violent or property victimization, although cross-sectional analyses generally reveal that victimization risks are higher for persons who have higher levels of activity outside the home (Hough 1987; Sampson and Wooldredge 1987; Massey, Krohn, and Bonati 1989; Kennedy and Forde 1991).

Studies of the physical characteristics of burgled households and interviews with known offenders also suggest that the visibility and accessibility of attractive targets influence risks of victimization (Rep-

petto 1974; Waller and Okihiro 1978; Bennett and Wright 1985; Walsh 1986; Hough 1987). Unfortunately, little research has examined how active participation in particular types of routine activities (e.g., bar visits, visiting places where teenagers “hang out”) influences risks of violent victimization.

C. Target Attractiveness

A central assumption underlying current victimization theories is that particular targets are selected because they have symbolic or economic value to the offender. However, crime targets are also attractive to offenders when they are smaller in size (i.e., more portable) and there is less physical resistance against attack or illegal removal (Cohen, Kluegel, and Land 1981). Under a structural-choice model of victimization, it is the differential value or subjective utility associated with crime targets that determines the source of victimization within a social context (Miethe and Meier 1990, p. 250).

A variety of indicators of target attractiveness have been employed. In the original work on routine activity theory, Cohen and Felson (1979) compared the theft rate for portable and movable durables (e.g., electronic components, television sets, radios, automobiles and their accessories) with their overall circulation rate. The decreased size of these durable goods from the early 1960s through the mid-1970s also corresponds with increases in official crime rates in the United States. However, the supply of many of these portable durable goods (e.g., televisions, radios, car tape players, phonograph cartridges) may not be a good indicator of target attractiveness for studies of crime rates over time when one considers that the reduced costs and increased availability of many of these items may lead to their devaluation as “attractive” crime targets. As a general proxy for purchasing power and the supply of expensive goods, median family income and the gross national product are aggregate measures of target attractiveness that are not susceptible to such a devaluation over time.

The major measures of target attractiveness at the individual level of analysis have been the ownership of expensive and portable consumer goods (e.g., videocassette recorders, color television sets, bicycles, motorcycles), carrying cash and jewelry in public, family income, and social class (Sampson and Wooldredge 1987; Miethe and Meier 1990). As a measure of economic attractiveness, family income is commonly recognized as a proxy of this concept because it can be immediately recognized by offenders in most cases (e.g., through the geographical location of a dwelling within a city, its exterior condition, or

the general appearance of the individual). In the case of expressive acts of interpersonal violence, it has been difficult to think of an unambiguous measure of target attractiveness.

Similar to the findings of research on exposure, findings on the effects of target attractiveness have not been consistent. Higher risks of victimization for persons with higher income are observed in some studies but not in others (Cohen and Cantor 1980, 1981; Cohen, Kluegel, and Land 1981; Hough 1987; Miethe and Meier 1990; Miethe, Stafford, and Sloane 1990). Persons who carry larger sums of money while in public places have a greater net risk of assault victimization, but ownership of a videocassette recorder was found either to decrease or to have no significant impact on individuals' risks of burglary (Sampson and Wooldredge 1987; Miethe and Meier 1990). Studies of crime rates for geographic areas also yield inconsistent results about the relationship between economic conditions and crime rates (Cohen, Felson, and Land 1980; Cohen 1981; Stahura and Sloan 1988; Miethe, Hughes, and McDowall 1991). Clearly, the effects vary according to the indicator chosen, suggesting that more conceptual attention must be devoted both to exposure and target attractiveness.

D. Capable Guardianship

The final major component of current victimization theories involves the ability of persons or objects to prevent the occurrence of crime. Guardianship has both social (interpersonal) and physical dimensions. Social guardianship includes the number of household members, the density of friendship networks in the neighborhood, and having neighbors watch property or a dwelling when the home is unoccupied. The availability of others (e.g., friends, neighbors, pedestrians, law enforcement officers) may prevent crime by their presence alone or through offering physical assistance in warding off an attack. Physical guardianship involves target-hardening activities (e.g., door/window locks, window bars, burglar alarms, guard dogs, ownership of firearms), other physical impediments to household theft (e.g., street lighting, guarded public entrances), and participation in collective activities (e.g., neighborhood watch programs, home security surveys). Regardless of its particular form, the availability of capable guardianship is deemed important because it indicates increased "costs" to would-be offenders (e.g., greater effort, greater risk of detection and apprehension) and thus should decrease the opportunity for victimization.

A review of previous research on guardianship activities reveals several general trends. First, target-hardening efforts are widespread in

the United States and may be regarded as the most widespread and common forms of crime prevention. The majority of people in urban and suburban areas take routine precautions against crime such as locking doors and windows, using exterior lighting, and having neighbors watch their property (Dubow 1979; Skogan and Maxfield 1981; Miethe 1991). Collective crime prevention activities (e.g., property-marking projects, Neighborhood Watch) have also been organized throughout the country (Rosenbaum 1987, 1990).

Second, the success of guardianship activities has been mixed. Physical and social guardianship is associated with lower rates of victimization in several studies but not in others (Scarr 1973; Reppetto 1974; Lavrakas et al. 1981; Skogan and Maxfield 1981; Winchester and Jackson 1982; Yin 1986; Rosenbaum 1987, 1990; Miethe and Meier 1990). However, several authors (e.g., Mayhew 1984) argue that the use of cross-sectional designs has contributed to these inconsistent results because of what is called the "victimization effect." The victimization effect is the tendency for persons to take precautions as a consequence of being victimized. Because cross-sectional designs cannot determine the temporal ordering of victimization experiences and heightened awareness of crime prevention, an observed positive relationship may mask the deterrent effect of precautions on victimization risks.

Third, few studies of guardianship have exercised sufficient controls for other factors influencing victimization risks. Under such conditions, it is impossible to ascertain unambiguously whether differences between protected and unprotected residents are due to the deterrent effect of protective actions or to other factors (e.g., lifestyles, target attractiveness, proximity to high-crime areas) that also alter the likelihood of victimization.

V. Problems with Previous Evaluations of Victimization Theories

Although theories of victimization have been the object of much research, there are several recurring problems that preclude complete confidence in the results of this research. These involve inadequate measures of key concepts, the lack of sufficient statistical controls, and the failure to examine multilevel and context-specific models of victimization.

A. *Inadequate Measures of Key Concepts*

The development of clear empirical indicators of key theoretical concepts has been a major problem in the development of victimization

theory. This is a problem in many theoretical areas in criminology, but the popularity of criminal opportunity theories of victimization makes this problem somehow more pressing than in areas where there is little research activity. We refer to this problem as one of *theoretical indeterminacy*, or the ability of the same indicator to serve more than one theoretical master. Consider the following alternative interpretations of the indicators of key concepts in victimization theories.

Proximity to motivated offenders is generally considered the physical distance between pools of offenders and victims, but this concept has usually been measured by the degree of population concentration (e.g., living in an urban versus rural area) and the socioeconomic characteristics of the geographical area. From this perspective, living in a large urban area and a low socioeconomic neighborhood are widely used as proxy measures of proximity (Cohen, Kluegel, and Land 1981; Hough 1987). However, it is easy to see that these variables may not only measure proximity but also a breakdown in social control, population heterogeneity, diminished economic opportunity, and other factors underlying traditional theories of criminality that attempt to explain the motivation of offenders. Using such indicators, higher victimization risks for persons who live in urban areas or low-income neighborhoods would not empirically distinguish theories of victimization from theories of criminality. Without greater conceptual refinement, it is hard to know what is being tested.

We have already mentioned that *exposure* to crime is usually indicated by the level of nonhousehold activity. Accordingly, persons who are employed outside the home or are going to school are assumed to be more exposed to crime than persons whose daily activities are more likely to take place around the home (e.g., unemployed, homemakers, retired, disabled). Yet such nonhousehold activities may actually be associated with "low exposure" because both work and school take place in a confined environment with a relatively high level of guardianship and supervision. However, only in the case of the Victim-Risk Supplement of the NCS and the British Crime Survey (BCS) are activities in particular public places (e.g., going to bars/taverns, taking public transit) included as variables that may be used to develop better measures of exposure to risky and vulnerable situations. Furthermore, without controlling for other factors, measuring exposure in this manner is consistent with some theories of criminality (e.g., differential association) that predict a relationship between nonhousehold activity and crime because of the acquisition of criminal norms, not because of greater risk of victimization.

When examining crime rates and social trends, Cohen and Felson (1979) used the "household activity ratio" as a measure of exposure. As defined earlier, this ratio is a composite index of the number of married women in the labor force and the number of nonhusband/nonwife households. Cohen and Felson (1979) assume that this ratio measures both the dispersion of the population away from households and the supply of durable goods susceptible to theft, but it is equally indicative of the prevalence of nontraditional families and reductions in social integration, ideas that are consistent with several theories of criminality as well as Cohen and Felson's theory of routine activities. In this sense, the positive association between crime rates and non-household activity could be due as much to social disorganization processes (e.g., problems of norm transmission and community control) or a breakdown of bonds to mainstream society (i.e., lower attachment, commitment, involvement and belief in conventional activity) as to increases in the supply of criminal opportunities from greater exposure and lower guardianship. If findings fit both sets of theories equally, then opportunity-based theories, while plausible, do not tell us anything unique about the social ecology of crime (Miethe, Hughes, and McDowall 1991, p. 168).

"Target attractiveness" is defined in terms of both its material and symbolic value to offenders (Cohen, Kluegel, and Land 1981). However, measures of individual ownership and the circulation of small but expensive durable goods (e.g., jewelry, audiovisual equipment) are not routinely available in the NCS yearly data or census reports. Thus, target attractiveness is usually measured by general economic conditions (e.g., family income, unemployment rate) even though such indicators may equally serve as surrogates for lower criminal motivation (because higher income and lower unemployment indicate greater legitimate economic opportunities) and greater exposure to crime (because higher income affords greater leisure activity outside the home).

The only available measure of guardianship in the NCS series and census data is the number of members in the household. Neither source provides measures of safety precautions and other types of guardianship on a routine basis. In the case of property crimes against the dwelling (e.g., burglary, vandalism, theft of property around the home), larger households should have lower victimization risks because the dwelling would be less likely to be unoccupied. As a measure of guardianship for violent crime, it must be assumed that the greater the household size, the less likely a person will be alone in a public place.

However, household size may also have a crime-enhancing effect as a result of the impact of household size on household crowding and, in turn, the possible adverse consequences of crowding on criminal motivation.

B. The Use of Secondary Data

What these examples also show is that the reliance on secondary data has contributed to the use of inadequate measures of proximity, exposure, attractiveness, and guardianship. The proxy measures typically do not tap each dimension of the underlying concepts and have ambiguous meanings. Substantive inferences about the predictive utility of victimization theories are questionable under such conditions.

Indeed, we would argue that reliance on secondary data sources is one of the basic causes of measurement problems in studies of victimization. Given that victimization is such a rare event (only about 25 percent of U.S. households are “touched” by any crime each year and most of that is relatively minor), it is not surprising that the enormous costs of getting a large sample of particular types of crime victims and nonvictims prohibit many researchers from collecting their own data. However, the largest data source on individuals’ victimization experiences, the yearly National Crime Victimization Survey series, was designed primarily to provide alternative estimates of the rate of crime rather than to test theories of victimization. The victim-risk supplement of the NCS data and the current NCS redesign are the only national data in this series that have potential for such theoretical analyses (Skogan 1990). Similarly, census data are the primary data source for studies of crime rates in geographical areas. Unfortunately, census data are collected primarily for political and administrative reasons. Thus, although both NCS data and census reports for various aggregate units are widely available, neither of these sources provides complete and unequivocal measures of the key concepts underlying victimization theories.

C. The Use of Statistical Controls

Statistical control for other variables is virtually a requirement for causal inference in nonexperimental designs. Statistical control allows for an assessment of the net impact of one variable on another once adjustments are made for the variation shared between the primary independent variable and other predictor variables. Empirical studies of victimization processes, however, have rarely included measures of

each major concept and component underlying victimization theories even though proximity, exposure, attractiveness, and lack of guardianship are considered *necessary* conditions for predatory crime. The failure to include adequate statistical controls for all relevant variables may seriously distort inferences about the substantive impact of each of these factors on victimization risks.

When measures of a particular concept have multiple meanings, statistical control is one way of disentangling and isolating the unique effects of each theoretical component. Given the pervasiveness of ambiguous measures of key concepts underlying theories of victimization, statistical control is especially important. Most measures of theoretical concepts used in studies of victimization have ambiguous meanings (Miethe, Hughes, and McDowall 1991). The following are examples. *Female labor-force participation* may represent either wider exposure, decreased guardianship, increased target attractiveness, or reduced criminal motivations resulting from rising economic resources. *Income* may represent target attractiveness, higher exposure from nonhousehold activity, or reduced criminal motivation. *Unemployment* may indicate criminogenic conditions, reduced circulation of money, and reduced levels of nonhousehold leisure activities. And *household size* may represent higher guardianship or increases in criminogenic conditions due to the adverse impact of household crowding. It is not possible to assess the adequacy of theoretical concepts when their presumed empirical indicators have multiple meanings. Previous evaluations of criminal opportunity theories have not included sufficient measures of key concepts or exercised sufficient statistical controls to isolate the unique impact of each theoretical component.

D. Level of Analysis and Model Specification

Previous evaluations of theories of criminality and victimization have relied on what is called a “main effects” or “additive model.” Under such a specification, the impact of a variable is assumed to be identical across levels of another variable. When applied to theories of victimization, the additive specification assumes that the impact of target attractiveness, for example, is the same for persons who vary in their exposure to crime and have different levels of guardianship. The impact of guardianship is likewise presumed to be the same across various social contexts. Regardless of where individuals live and their particular routine activities and lifestyles, increases in household size or the number of safety precautions are assumed to decrease risks of predatory crime.

However, the failure to examine whether variables have different effects across different contexts is a type of model misspecification that may dramatically alter substantive conclusions about the predictive validity of current theories.

There are various ways in which contextual effects can occur in models of victimization. What is required are data that permit multi-level observation and sensitivity to alternative social contexts. Data that do not permit the examination of multilevel relationships or the estimation of separate models of victimization across different social contexts are severely limited. Most aggregate data sources are restricted to one level of analysis (e.g., individual, census tract, city, SMSA) and do not contain measures of contextual variables. The opportunity to perform contextual analyses is important because it may more clearly specify the conditions under which proximity, exposure, target attractiveness, and guardianship alter individuals' risks and aggregate rates of predatory crime. The results of the few studies using this approach also suggest its utility as a research tool for testing theories of victimization (Sampson and Wooldredge 1987; Smith and Jarjoura 1989; Miethe and McDowall 1993).

VI. Contextual Effects in Models of Victimization

The context of crime is a particularly important dimension, and the further development of victimization or opportunity-based theories of crime may require greater sensitivity to contextual information. A fundamental aspect of predatory crime is that it occurs in a social context in which there is a convergence of victims and offenders in time and space. It is surprising that little research has incorporated aspects of the social context directly into theories of victimization. To their credit, routine activity and lifestyle-exposure theories acknowledge the importance of exposure and proximity to risky or vulnerable situations as necessary conditions for predatory crime. However, what is absent is a clear specification of how aspects of the wider social context influence risks of victimization. There are several ways in which the social context can both facilitate and constrain the occurrence of crime.

A major contribution of macrosociological theories of criminality is that they identify the structural conditions associated with crime. For example, population heterogeneity and density, residential mobility, and low economic opportunity are identified as criminogenic forces because they either increase cultural conflict, decrease economic resources, or hamper the development of effective mechanisms of social

control (Kornhauser 1978; Bursik 1988; Sampson and Groves 1989). One primary way in which these social forces generate a facilitating context for crime is by increasing the pool of potential offenders. The greater an individual's proximity to these criminogenic areas, the greater one's risks of victimization.

According to current theories of victimization, an alternative way in which the social context influences predatory crime is by increasing the supply of criminal opportunities. Because routine activities of everyday life are said to create criminal opportunities, geographical areas with high levels of public activity, expensive and portable consumer goods, and lower levels of physical guardianship are presumed to have higher rates of crime. Some persons, regardless of their own routine activities and lifestyles, may be more vulnerable than others to crime simply by living in these "crime-attractive" areas. The composition and structure of a neighborhood may influence individuals' victimization risks because both give off cues to would-be offenders about the potential yield and costs for engaging in crime in that geographical area.

Research on the crime-reduction benefits of safety precautions is an example of how elements of the wider social context influence individuals' risks of victimization. As a form of guardianship, it is widely assumed that taking safety precautions (e.g., locking doors, installing alarms, owning dogs) reduces risks of predatory crime. However, what is less clear is how a person's chances of victimization are influenced by the safety precautions taken by others in their immediate neighborhood. The safety precautions of others may either enhance or reduce an individual's risks of victimization. According to the arguments about *crime displacement* (Gabor 1981, 1990; Cornish and Clarke 1987; Miethe 1991), persons are negatively affected by the protective actions of others in their neighborhood because these actions are assumed to deflect crime to less protected others. Alternatively, a "free-rider" effect suggests that persons benefit from the social control activities of their immediate neighbors because these actions convey to would-be offenders an image that this area, in general, is a risky place to commit crime. Regardless of whether these safety precautions of others inhibit or enhance victimization risks, the major point is that the community context of crime control in both cases is said to alter individuals' risks of victimization substantially.

The assumption underlying contextual analyses is that victimization risks and its predictors vary by characteristics of the wider social con-

text. These contextual effects can take various forms. First, living near “hot spots” for crime (Sherman, Gartin, and Buerger 1989) may be especially harmful because of proximity to areas with high concentration of offenders. Second, routine activities and lifestyles may have context-specific effects on victimization risks. For example, the crime-enhancing effects of exposure and proximity to motivated offenders may be important only in neighborhoods with low levels of informal and formal social control. When there are high levels of social integration and safety precautions in an area, these social control mechanisms may be of sufficient strength to deter crime and overwhelm the adverse effects of exposure and proximity to crime. Alternatively, the supply of expensive consumer goods in the immediate environment may influence the risks of property victimization even for residents who lack these possessions. As indicated by the conflicting predictions about displacement and free-rider effects, it may be unclear in other cases whether the same contextual factor impedes or enhances an individuals’ risks of victimization. However, regardless of the particular type of contextual effect, what is important about multilevel models and contextual analysis is that victimization risks are seen as a function of both the routine activities of residents and the composition and structure of the wider geographical area.

It is difficult to overemphasize the potential import of including both measures of individuals’ lifestyles and contextual variables in studies of victimization. First, a major premise of sociological theory is that social conditions enable and constrain human activity. Although not denying that individuals’ lifestyles influence their vulnerability to crime, most sociological theories assume that the community context has a direct impact on victimization risks independent of individual characteristics. Second, it is possible that many of the presumed individual-level effects are actually reflective of community dynamics. For example, the strong impact of being young or unmarried on victimization risks is commonly attributed to the lifestyles of such persons. Yet the influence of these factors may simply reflect the tendency for both single persons and young adults to live in transitional neighborhoods with more potential offenders, lower internal social control, and high rates of public activity (see also Smith and Jarjoura 1989). Under these conditions, too much importance would be placed on these individual-level causes of victimization risks.

The importance of contextual factors has been empirically documented in several recent studies. For example, Miethe and McDowall

(1993) found that contextual factors had significant main and interactive effects on risks of both violent and property victimization. The impact of individuals' routine activities and lifestyles depends on the particular composition of the wider neighborhood. Sampson and Wooldredge (1987) found that personal risks of burglary were influenced by the level of family disruption, single-person households, and density of ownership of portable consumer goods (i.e., VCRs) in the wider community. Smith and Jarjoura (1989) found that risks of burglary were influenced by several neighborhood factors (e.g., racial heterogeneity, population instability, median income). Aspects of community composition and structure have been included in several additional studies of individuals' risks of victimization (e.g., Cohen, Kluegel, and Land 1981; Simcha-Fagan and Schwartz 1986; Sampson and Lauritsen 1990).

VII. Prospects for Integrating Theories of Victimization and Theories of Offending

The development of theories of victimization requires the development of theories of offending. The objectives of theories of crime can only be attained with an understanding of the processes by which victims come to experience risk of crime and offenders come to be motivated to commit crime and of the social contexts that unite these parallel sets of processes. For these reasons, the theoretical objective in criminology should be identified as the development of defensible theories of crime, not just theories of victimization or just theories of offending.

The development of testable propositions about crime requires information about both victims and offenders. This information may involve data pertaining to group differences in offending and victimization (sometimes referred to as "structural" information) or to social psychological processes in offending and victimization (sometimes called "processual" information). These levels of observation and analysis have served criminologists well in the development of theoretical perspectives on both offending and victimization, but there has been no systematic attempt to formulate integrated theories of offending *and* victimization.

The prospects for such an integration are bright, but it must be admitted that previous efforts at theoretical integration in criminology have not been terribly successful. Several notable attempts in recent years have been made to integrate different theoretical traditions (Elliott, Ageton, and Cantor 1979; Pearson and Weiner 1985; Thornberry

1987), and there have been discussions about the issue of methods and desirability of theoretical integration in general (Hirschi 1979; Short 1979, 1985; Elliott 1985; Messner, Krohn, and Liska 1989). So far, the idea of theoretical integration has been applied only to theories of criminality, and theories of victimization have been relatively neglected.

The disadvantages of integrative efforts are initially conceptual and theoretical. That is, some perspectives do not lend themselves to integration because they make contradictory assumptions that cannot be reconciled. Cultural deviance and control theories, for example, have been said to contain irreconcilable differences in domain assumptions (Kornhauser 1978), which, if correct, would make any meaningful integration impossible. Several studies have attempted to unite variables from different theoretical traditions and have reported results as though they represented a unified perspective (Johnson 1979; Pearson and Weiner 1985). Such efforts are perhaps harmless (and perhaps even positive) unless they give the impression that the result of such efforts is a “new” rather than a logically recombined theory.

The problems of theoretical integration are significant (see also Meier 1989), but they may not be insurmountable. For one thing, there is no reason to believe that *any* theory of criminality and *any* theory of victimization make incompatible assumptions about the nature of crime or social reality. Furthermore, no theory of criminality makes explicit assumptions about victim processes that preclude integrative efforts; likewise, no theory of victimization makes any restrictive assumptions about offenders.

As a way of overcoming compartmentalized thinking, the integration of theories of criminality and victimization should improve substantially our understanding of crime. From their inception, theories of criminality (e.g., strain, social disorganization, differential association, social bond) have emphasized the structural and social psychological factors associated with criminal motivation, but they have ignored how the actions of potential crime targets condition the physical opportunities for victimization. The primary goal of these theories has been to explain the decision to engage in crime. In contrast, theories of victimization emphasize the causal role of personal characteristics that enhance the accessibility and attractiveness of crime victims, but these theories largely neglect sources of criminal motivation. By addressing both crime-commission and target-selection decisions, it is easier to see the value of an integrated perspective.

From an integrated perspective, crime is not simply what offenders do and what victims do. Rather, understanding crime from an integrated perspective requires an understanding of the social structure that surrounds both criminals and victims. It is that structure, or context, that creates both offender motivation and victim risk-taking. Integrated theories are theories sensitive to the nature and impact of that structure. Such theories are informed about offenders, victims, and structural facilitators that link them. Furthermore, such theories, if they are to be truly useful, will be testable and judged on their predictive validity. Traditional "isolationist" approaches that focus only on one component of the larger picture are necessarily limited and should be tolerated only insofar as they contribute to larger theoretical structures. Both more sophisticated offender and victim theories can make such a contribution.

VIII. Conclusions

Current theories of victimization highlight the symbiotic relationship between conventional and illegal activities. Regardless of their particular terminology, routine activities and lifestyle-exposure theories emphasize how criminal opportunities develop out of the routine activities of everyday life. Routine activity patterns that increase proximity to motivated offenders, increase exposure to risky and dangerous situations, enhance the expected utility or attractiveness of potential crime targets, and reduce the level of guardianship are assumed to increase aggregate rates and individuals' risks of predatory crime. These criminal opportunity theories have been used to account for changes in crime rates in the United States over time, the level of crime in aggregate units (e.g., cities, SMSAs), differences in victimization risks for different social groups (e.g., males, single persons, younger people), and individuals' risks of victimization.

The results of previous studies give some indication of the explanatory power of these criminal opportunity theories. There is some evidence to support each of the major components underlying these theories (i.e., proximity, exposure, attractiveness, and guardianship). However, this supporting evidence is less impressive when the major limitations of previous work are acknowledged. That previous research has generally used inadequate proxy measures of key concepts, includes few statistical controls, and has not examined rigorously multi-level models and contextual effects casts doubt on the substantive conclusions from these studies.

While current theories of victimization suggest that victims and offenders are inextricably linked in an ecology of crime, they do not provide sufficient information about the conditions of offending to permit adequate predictions of crime. This is, of course, also a failing of theories of criminality that concentrate only on accounting for the pool of motivated offenders; the victim side of the equation is neglected. More adequate theories should be sought in the exploration of combinations of victim and offender theories and a sensitivity to the social contexts in which crimes are committed.

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