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Teaching About Victimization

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The Criminologist

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Editor's Note: In this issue of *the Criminologist*, we are fortunate to have, not only the “corners” filled with information and good advice that you are used to seeing, but also a new “President’s Corner,” where Bob Agnew outlines how the ASC is governed and tells us about some new initiatives of your society. In “Teaching about Victimization,” Alison Cares, Linda Williams & David Hirschel bring you up-to-date on a perennial issue for anyone who teaches victim-related courses – how to keep students (and you) safe in the classroom. I’m sure you will find it thought-provoking and helpful. Not only that – this issue offers you an essay by Anthony Braga, Laurie Robinson and Edward Davis on forming research partnerships with police departments, an essay by Walter DeKeseredy inspired by Jody Raphael’s *Rape is Rape*, and a provocative “View from the Field” by Steve Van Dine giving ASC members advice about how to influence policy. This issue also includes a summary of obituaries published recently, a feature that *the Criminologist* will update periodically. Please join me in thanking all of our colleagues who took the time and effort to help bring this issue to you!

Carolyn Rebecca Block, ASC Vice-President

TEACHING ABOUT VICTIMIZATION

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Introduction

Given the prevalence of victimization, especially among college-age populations, we all have students who have experienced their own victimization or the victimization of someone close to them. Violent victimization rates are highest among those age 18 to 24 (Truman & Planty, 2012), an estimated one in four to five women experience an attempted or completed sexual assault during their college career (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000), and most victims of rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner were first victimized before the age of 25 (69% of female and 53% of male victims, Black et al., 2011). Some victims may be visible, in that they choose to share their experiences with you or the class, or their experience is otherwise public, but many will remain invisible. Course material related to victimization holds the potential to trigger emotional reactions, which are not limited to victims and survivors. Students who have experienced other types of trauma, such as military veterans, as well as any student with the emotional capacity for empathy, could have a strong reaction to materials on victimization. For example, realizing that engaging in preventive efforts cannot guarantee safety can be very unsettling (e.g., O’Halloran & O’Halloran, 2001, p. 94). Given this reality, how can we teach about the often complicated nature of victimization in a manner that does not inflict additional harm?

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Many faculty experience trepidation, mild distress, or are outright resistant to including victim issues in their courses. Some see this as too emotion-laden, or fear that raising these issues will open Pandora's Box to being overwhelmed with students sharing experiences of victimization. Faculty voice concern that they are not counselors, and some experience "role strain" in having to field student disclosures of victimization (Hayes-Smith, Richards, & Branch, 2010).

Faculty reluctance to engage in discussion of victim issues in courses could be costly. Our students often go on to employment in the criminal justice system or allied professions. In those careers, many will have extensive contact with victims of crime, some as the first person informed of, or encountered after, victimization. Insensitive treatment at the hands of law enforcement and other helpers increases victims' distress and has been characterized as a "second victimization" (Campbell, 2005; Campbell, 2008). Other students, such as correctional, probation, and parole officers, will deal with victimization in the context of work with offenders, a high proportion of whom have extensive abuse histories (e.g., Carlson & Shaffer, 2010; Weeks & Widom, 1998). Therefore, the content of our courses and how we model talking about victimization form the foundation of the improvement of service provision to future victims of crime. As some students will also become the next generation of researchers and teachers on victimization, we are also modeling for them.

Teaching about victimization requires careful course design, and a well thought-out plan for responding to situations in which students react emotionally to coursework. Although our students frequently work with victims, and training to conduct research in this area is critical to the field, there is little scholarship addressing how to teach this material. In this article, we aim to broaden and stimulate the conversation around teaching about victimization, and to provide suggestions on minimizing the likelihood of inflicting additional trauma.

Planning the Course

Teaching responsibly about victimization starts before the first class. Careful thought needs to go into the design of the course, syllabus, activities, and assignments. The goal is to create a safe space for students to engage with course material (Miller, 2001; O'Halloran & O'Halloran, 2001). If this is not achieved, the result may be to silence some classroom members, particularly survivors of victimization (Konradi, 1993). A silenced student's learning is affected negatively, because that student is not fully engaged in the material; as a result, the class participation grade may suffer. There is also a cost for the class as a whole, since the silencing of victims deprives the class discussion of an important perspective on issues of victimization.

Creating a safe space means considering alternatives you would allow if students have trouble with aspects of the course. It also means, from day one, being clear about what content is going to be covered, how it may affect students, and that being affected in these ways is normal (e.g., Zurbriggen, 2011). This gives victims, as well as other students, control over their educational experience (Black, 2006; Newman, 1999). Feeling in control is crucial, as victimization may undermine an individual's feelings of control over themselves and the world around them (Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983). Restoring a feeling of control is thought to help improve victims' psychological health (Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983).

Trigger Warnings

When lectures, guest speakers' presentations, multi-media demonstrations, activities, class readings, or other course materials hold the potential to trigger emotional reactions, warning students ahead of time provides them the opportunity to make decisions regarding how and when to engage with those materials (Jones, 2002). Warning early and often via multiple mediums provides students maximum opportunity to engage in informed decision-making and feel that they are in control. The first trigger warning should be on the first day of any course that includes information with the potential to emotionally trigger students. Trigger warnings should be given in at least the two classes before the presentation of potentially triggering material (or engagement with it outside of class, if that is the case), as well as at the beginning of the day when the material is presented. If an assignment is going to be shared with others, include that detail ahead of time (e.g., Hollander, 2000), so students can control how much of their experiences they share. These steps allow students time to think about what they need to do for self-care (see below) and give them an opportunity to talk to the instructor about their concerns and possible alternate arrangements.

Trigger warnings should state that anyone can be emotionally triggered, and that displaying an emotional reaction is not necessarily a sign of victimization, but could be the result of trauma from another source, a sign of stress, or an indication of empathy. It is also important to be liberal in giving trigger warnings, as material that may seem to have low potential for emotional impact may still trigger someone.

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As an example of how to implement trigger warnings, in a criminology course section on labeling theory and restorative justice, Alison assigns victim impact statements as reading and the class watches victim-offender mediations. To provide advance warning, she includes a statement in the syllabus and on the course webpage that she discusses in class the first day. This provides students the opportunity to think about how they want to handle that material and, if desired, talk to her about accommodations before the add/drop period passes. Later, in the two classes preceding presentation of the material, she reminds students of the forthcoming content and encourages them to think about self-care measures they might take.

Self-Care for Students

Encourage students to think about steps they can take if the course material has an emotional impact on them. All students can benefit from this in the short-term and also over their life-course. To reinforce the importance of self-care, faculty can incorporate an assignment or class exercise where students develop self-care plans (e.g., O'Halloran & O'Halloran, 2001, p.94). Faculty can also facilitate the development of effective self-care plans (Zurbriggen, 2011) by sharing the general categories of self-care (biobehavioral, affective-cognitive, relational, and spiritual; O'Halloran & O'Halloran, 2001) and brainstorming examples of each. An example of an affective-cognitive and relational self-care strategy is watching a favorite comforting movie with a trusted friend or family member. It is also important to share examples of maladaptive self-care strategies (Zurbriggen, 2011), such as drinking, drug use, and overeating, to help students identify when they are not dealing effectively with stress. Finally, since self-care plans should include how to access outside support resources if normal mechanisms of coping are not effective, faculty should have a prepared list of resources available (see below for guidance on developing that list). In advance of potentially triggering material, after a trigger warning, remind students about their self-care plans.

Referral Resources

Faculty should develop and make available a list of support resources with current contact information. This list should include campus, community, state, and national resources. Sometimes students do not want on-campus help, because they do not trust that confidentiality will be maintained. Therefore, it is helpful to indicate which resources provide confidential services. Again, this gives students control over their choices.

It is helpful to provide general resources (e.g., counseling services), victim-specific resources (e.g., rape crisis hotline), and culturally-specific resources (e.g., LGBTQ services agency). Campus resources to consider include counseling, health services, chaplain/faiith community, residential life, dean of students, women's center, and campus police. Local community resources to consider include rape crisis centers, domestic violence shelters, child protection services, elder abuse services, criminal justice system based victim advocates (often based in the prosecutor's office), police, and local chapters of organizations such as MADD and Parents of Murdered Children. Including state and national resources helps students to access services when they are not at campus (and for those who teach online, students may be from anywhere). State and national resources may also provide support for types of victimization for which support may not be readily available on campus or locally, such as for identity theft or hate crimes. Statewide services are frequently toll free numbers that provide crisis counseling, referrals, and perhaps the option to report victimization. These numbers may be for all types of victimization, or focused on particular types of victimization, such as sexual assault, domestic violence, elder abuse, child abuse, or identity theft. State victim compensation boards and offices of victim assistance/victim advocates are also helpful to include. Many states have a website where visitors can search for services that meet their needs. National resources to consider also tend to be helplines and websites that provide services such as crisis counseling and referrals. Finally, many organizations, such as the federal Office for Victims of Crime and RAINN (Rape Abuse Incest National Network) are beginning to offer their services via mobile apps.

To insure students can access these resources whenever they need them and do not have to come to faculty to get them, make the list easily accessible. We recommend listing "Resources" in the syllabus (e.g., Gore & Black, 2009) and on the course webpage. Other ideas include dedicating a part of the whiteboard in each class to a listing of resources (e.g., Konradi, 1993), including resources on PowerPoint slides (e.g., Durfee & Rosenberg, 2009), and making materials from local resources available at the front of the room (Block, personal communication). When material is physically available in the class, making an announcement that information is available up front for anyone who wants to learn more about these organizations and what they do, makes it safe for a student to take information without "outing" themselves as a victim.

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Handling Disclosures

During any course, some students may share their victimization experiences. Research suggests that the reactions of others to disclosures of victimization can have an effect on social psychological outcomes for victims and their future decision making, such as whether to report victimization to police (e.g., Greenberg & Ruback, 1992; Kocot & Goodman, 2003; Ullman, 2010). Thus, it is vital that faculty are prepared to handle such sharing in a manner that does no harm.

At the beginning of any course that will cover materials on trauma and victimization, make it clear that the class is an academic and not therapeutic setting (e.g., Miller, 2001; Seegmiller, 1995; Yllo, 1989). This helps students understand what is and is not appropriate to talk about in class. If the course is going to include a lot of talking about victimization, it may be helpful for the class to create ground rules (which can be via a class exercise) on confidentiality and the limits on disclosure of personal information (O'Halloran & O'Halloran, 2001). Guidelines in a syllabus, underscored the first day of class, can also set the tone related to sharing experiences of victimization (e.g., Barlow & Becker-Blease, 2012). For example, a syllabus may include a statement such as:

“Unfortunately, victimization is common, so many of you may have had personal experiences with victimization. This can be very difficult. While it is understandable that you may have strong reactions to the subject matter of the course, course discussions are not an appropriate place to process those feelings. I am available outside of class to provide support and referrals to appropriate resources. There are also resources listed in the syllabus and on the course website for you to consider using.”

It is also important to model for students what an appropriate response is to a disclosure of victimization. One way to do that is to cover the research on how responses to disclosures may affect victims (e.g., Greenberg & Ruback, 1992; Kocot & Goodman, 2003; Ullman, 2010), and to provide examples of appropriate ways to respond. When a student discloses in class, it is important to listen until they are finished. While listening, be aware of your body language – for example looking around the room while the student is sharing or looking at the floor and shifting from one foot to another would communicate that their sharing is making you uncomfortable or that you are not interested. Once they have finished, thank them for sharing with the class and try to tie something from their story to a point that is relevant to the class. For example:

“Thank you for sharing with us. Student A [name of the student] spoke very eloquently about a point I would like to expand on. Although each experience is different, what Student A shared illustrates a point that researchers have found.”

Occasionally a student may go on at length or use class time to inappropriately process their feelings. This can be a challenge for a faculty member. At the earliest opportunity, typically when a student pauses to take a breath, tactfully intervene and steer the conversation elsewhere. An example of how to do that is:

“Excuse me. I am sorry to have to have you stop here, since this is obviously important. Unfortunately, there is some additional material we simply have to cover today, so I need to move on to that. If you have a few minutes after class, I would love to talk to you more.”

If this becomes a repeated issue, it may be helpful to consult campus counseling services or a local victim services helpline for guidance in handling the situation.

Faculty and students need to know university/college, state and federal reporting requirements (Branch, Hayes-Smith, & Richards, 2011). These will include compliance with Title IX (which addresses gender discrimination in education, including college policies on sexual violence) and the Jeanne Cleary Act (which addresses issues of campus safety and security, including reporting of campus crimes). These requirements may extend to being a mandated reporter. Faculty may want to include limits on confidentiality on the syllabus, again to help victims maintain control when possible. When you are in a private setting and it is clear a student is going to share an experience, it is also important to share reporting requirements. Here is one example of language to use:

“I’m really glad you came to talk to me. What you tell me is confidential, meaning that I won’t tell anyone what you say to me, unless you want me to. However, there are a couple of exceptions: if you tell me that you plan to hurt yourself or others, the university requires me to report that” (Durfee & Rosenberg, 2009, p. 114).

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Students may disclose because they want to contribute information to the course or because they see a faculty member as a safe and supportive person who will not react negatively to their experience. When a student shares, the first step is to listen without judgment (Durfee & Rosenberg, 2009). How to respond beyond that depends on the setting. If it occurs in class, as outlined above, thank the student for being willing to share and try to tie something from the student's story to a point you are trying to make to the class (e.g., Miller, 2001; Newman, 1999). This acknowledges the student positively. Follow up with the student afterwards, in a more private setting. If a student shares outside of class, as before, acknowledge the student's story and trust in sharing with you. Then - safety first - insure that she/he is not in imminent danger. For example,

"The first thing I want to check is if you are safe now. Are you in any danger? Is it safe for you to go back to where you live?"

Next, provide referrals to relevant support resources, such as those listed on the syllabus. This supports the student but sets appropriate boundaries (Gore & Black, 2009). Then determine what the student needs related to your course and how to meet those needs. For example, "It sounds like parts of the course are difficult for you. Can you tell me what parts you have found difficult?" To wrap up, review any action plan agreed upon. Follow up with an email outlining the plan. Before sending the email, confirm with the student that it is safe to do so - in cases of intimate partner abuse, sometimes the perpetrator has access to the victim's email account.

Maintaining Appropriate Boundaries

When a student comes to a faculty member with personal issues, which may include victimization, it is critical to establish and maintain appropriate boundaries so that you can provide the best possible support. Our role as faculty is to provide support related to academic concerns. Support beyond that must come from other resources, to which faculty should refer students (see above). Faculty cannot, and should not, take on the role of therapist or counselor (even if trained as one), because that is incompatible with our role as evaluators. In the end, we have to sit in judgment of a student's work in the course and assign a grade. What the faculty role is, and what faculty can and cannot do, should be made clear to a student from the outset. For example:

"Whenever a student shares with me, I talk to her/him about what my role is and what I can and cannot do, just so everything is clear. As your professor, I am happy to work with you to try and accommodate your needs related to the class, such as giving you an extension on a paper, and talk with you about your performance in the class. However, because part of my job is to evaluate your work in the class, I cannot also be the person with whom you process your feelings about your experiences. I am happy to provide you with resources for people who can do that, and then it is your choice if you want to use them."

Faculty Self-Care

Remember to plan for your own self-care (e.g., Jones, 2002; Miller, 2001; O'Halloran & O'Halloran, 2001). Handling disclosures of victimization from students can be stressful (Hayes-Smith et al., 2010), as can be teaching about victim issues. In addition to the self-care techniques recommended above, faculty may want to find a trusted colleague to debrief with (Branch et al., 2011), or to pose hypothetical situations to when faced with a difficult student issue.

For More Information

Additional resources are available through the website for ASC's Division on Women and Crime (<http://www.hts.gatech.edu/dwc/>), and in many of the articles listed below. In addition, the National Scope Demonstration Project on Integrating Crime Victims' Issues into University and College Curricula, funded by the DOJ Office for Victims of Crime, offers free materials to faculty on teaching about victimization, including more detailed guidelines than presented here. Those materials can be accessed in the faculty & advocates section at www.uml.edu/vic.

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