



OLD AGE, VICTIMISATION AND CRIME

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ABSTRACT

This article explores old age as an important sociological and legal dimension of analysis and dissects its relationship to victimisation and contemporary crime. The article is concerned with examining how the notion of victim applies to older people within the life-course. I then move to explore the relationship between old age and victimisation and highlight a number of implications for the study of age and its relationship to victimisation. I conclude by suggesting that current political discourses position the concept of “victim” along neo-liberal lines of ‘responsibility’ as opposed to the societal construction of victim. In recent years, the experiences of ‘age groups’ across the life-course have been taken as a developing issue of concern in Criminology (Powell, 2013). Whilst this has been the case regarding ‘younger people’, the criminological development of ideas pertaining to the experiences and representations of ‘older people’ has been ‘unchartered territory’ (Brogden and Nijar, 2000). The aim is to demonstrate that researchers studying the relationship between older people and victimisation would benefit from a more careful conceptualisation of ‘age’, one which focuses on the ways in which ‘old age’ itself is socially constructed, is represented and used by particular interest groups.

Keywords: Crime, Victimisation, Ageing, Old Age, Criminology.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article explores old age as an important sociological dimension of analysis and dissects its relationship to victimisation and contemporary crime. The article is concerned with examining how the notion of victim applies to older people within the life-course. I then move to explore the relationship between old age and victimisation and highlight a number of implications for the study of age and its relationship to victimisation. I conclude by suggesting that current political discourses position the concept of “victim” along neo-liberal lines of ‘responsibility’ as opposed to the societal construction of victim. In recent years, the experiences of ‘age groups’ across the life-course have been taken as a developing issue of concern in Criminology (Powell, 2013). Whilst this has been the case regarding ‘younger people’, the criminological development of ideas pertaining to the experiences and representations of ‘older people’ has been ‘unchartered territory’ (Brogden and Nijar, 2000). Indeed, when comparing the category of ‘age’ to the criminological research that covers ‘race’, class and gender; age has been hidden and seen of as secondary importance. The major issue is perceived as being how to overcome the sociological triumvirate of ‘race’, class and gender

without ignoring the experiences of individuals based on other equally important variables such as age, disability and sexuality. My aim is to demonstrate that researchers studying the relationship between older people and victimisation would benefit from a more careful conceptualisation of 'age', one which focuses on the ways in which 'old age' itself is socially constructed, is represented and used by particular interest groups.

First, I must question how relevant old age is in the process of victimization. But before I do that, I will map out what is meant by the concept. In western societies, an individual's age is counted on a chronological or numerical foundation, beginning from birth to the current point of age, or when an individual has died. It is only by deconstructing age in the study of criminology and victimology that I can begin to see how and why such disciplinary discourses construct the notion of 'ageing' in relation to the victim.

Counting age is a social construction because it is a practice underpinned by conceptions of time in regional, national and global spaces, which came to be of increasing importance with the historical development of industrial capitalism (Phillipson, 1982). The concept of 'age' has three main focal points: first, age and ageing have a biological and physiological dimension, so that over time and space, the appearance of physical bodies change (Powell 2013); second, the ageing of an individual takes place within a particular period of time and space; third, as individuals, society has a number of socially defined expectations how people of certain ages are supposed to behave and how they are positioned via gender, social class and ethnicity. 'Old age' is difficult to define, the legal concept of 'pensionable age' has been defined as 'old age' (Biggs, 1993); those people requiring care management have been predominantly those older people aged 70 and over (Phillipson, 1998).

There are important implications here for how western society and the arrangement of political and economic structures create and sanction crime control policies grounded in such knowledge bases (Powell, 2013). Such knowledge bases are focused on: one) 'biological ageing' which refers to the internal and external physiological changes that take place in the individual body: and the second, psychological ageing which is understood as the developmental changes in mental functioning – the emotional and cognitive capacities. Scientific theories of ageing can be distinguished from the social construction of ageing: the first, focused on the bio-psychological or pathological constituent of ageing: and the second, on how ageing has been socially constructed.

Scientific models of ageing have also been prone to what Moody (1998) refers to as an "amalgam of advocacy and science" (quoted in Powell, 2013, 119) in a neo-liberal attempt to position individualised perceptions of ageing under the guise of science and its perceived tenets of value-freedom, objectivity and precision (Biggs, 1993). However, a fundamental question is how science has stabilised itself within a positivist criminological discourse that reflects not history, but the total preoccupation of science and the 'problems' of ageing? The elderly population should be a source of concern if only because it is a growing population and if people are fortunate enough not to die young will all become members of an ageing population. The United Nations estimates that by the year 2025, the global population of those over 60 years will double, from 542 million in 1995 to around 1.2 billion people (Powell 2013: 33).

The term 'elderly' has been broadly applied by government departments to those aged 50 and over, although societal assumptions and many researchers would tend towards retirement (another contested term) as a marker for the onset of 'old age' (Chivite-Matthews and Maggs 2002).



2. MAPPING OUT TERRAIN: CRIME AND VICTIMISATION

The criminological relevance of age is rooted early post-war years with the concern about the consequences of demographic change and the potential shortage of 'younger' workers in western economies. Indeed, a significant contribution of social theories of criminology has been to highlight how individual lives and behaviour which were thought to be determined solely by biological, medical and psychological factors, are, in fact, heavily influenced by *social environments* in which people live. Not only was age regarded as less important than 'race', class and gender, but the dominant explanatory framework concerning ageing came, as I discussed earlier with the notion of 'victim', from outside of social construction perspectives: scientific model. So it is of central importance that age came to be looked at in *social* terms.

Indeed, social researchers such as Gubrium (1974), quoting survey data collected in the late 1960s, suggest that older people are more often the victims of various kinds of fraud and elder abuse than younger people (although elder abuse, is not considered here as such, and is certainly underreported (Mawby and Walklate 1994). One has to raise the question as to why elder abuse is rarely viewed as criminal (either in legal or consensual terms or as an object of criminological interest) in the same way as, for example, mugging) (Morosawa, Dussich and Kirchhoff (2012).

While older people would certainly benefit from more accurate information about the risk of victimisation than they commonly receive through the mass media, their fear is related to the seriousness of the consequences if they were to be victimised, as well to the degree of the risk they face (See (Morosawa, Dussich and Kirchhoff (2012). When victimisation occurs, it often happens in the person's own home, which is perceived as a serious violation of privacy and feelings of safety and tends to highlight people's feelings of dependency and vulnerability (Elias, 1986, Jones 1987).

For many reasons the elderly population is a source of concern to social planners and to combat the fear of crime for the elderly age-homogenous living arrangements have been considered. If older people are characterised by an overall low degree of victimisation, then why have they been singled out as a specific group in research into the impact of crime? One possible answer can be found in the finding that, irrespective of age, those more concerned with the problem of crime and expressing most fear of crime are not necessarily the most likely to experience victimisation (Morosawa, Dussich and Kirchhoff, 2012).

Fear of the possibility of being criminally victimised has become part of the discourse of the risk society people inhabit. People are haunted by the possibility that a person could be

the latest victim of a crime. This ranges from the thought that a stranger could attack at any moment, either on the street or at home, and rob, assault, to, in the case of female victims, fear of rape. Although it must be noted that there are increasing reports of male-victim rapes (Home Office 1999), fear and the notion of vulnerability remain gendered (Dobash and Dobash, 1992, 2004). I see responses to fear of crime in the array of anti-theft devices; from CCTV cameras (Hughes, 1991; Coleman, 2004) to 'gated communities' (Hughes, 1991) and other forms of institutional segregation and it is "through such expert systems of power-knowledge that the lives of older people have been regulated, ordered, known, and disciplined" (Twigg 2004:65). The fear of crime operates in a myriad of emotional and practical levels, from feeling vulnerable and isolated, to affecting one's personal well-being.

Since the 1960s fear of crime has been one of the major growth areas for both academic research and policy initiatives (Fattah, 1995). Perhaps inevitably the major output on both fronts has been from criminologists and criminal justice system professionals in the U.S.A., but there has also been a growing international literature concerned with fear of crime and with measures to combat it. In the last 40 years over 400 articles, conference articles, monographs and books have been written on some aspect or other on the fear of crime (See Hale 1996). A considerable amount of research has already identified a number of factors which appear to make a contribution to fear. Hale (1996) suggests there is a social construction of vulnerability that needs unpacking in Criminology.

To try to unpack this, it could be argued that many citizens may feel vulnerable for a number of reasons. Some may feel unable to protect themselves physically or economically (Pantazis, 2000), or be incapable of making a fast retreat, others may feel less able to cope with the physical and emotional consequences of being victimised (Toseland, 1982). Research has identified 4 groups that fall into this vulnerability category: the old (Antunes et al, 1977; Baldassare, 1986; Braungart et al, 1980; Clarke and Lewis, 1982; Giles-Sims, 1984; Yin 1985), women (Gordon et al, 1980; Warr 1985), the poor and ethnic minorities (Taylor and Hale 1986, Box et al 1986, 1988). Three environmental clues – incivilities, neighbourhood housing conditions, and neighbourhood cohesion all make a contribution towards fear of crime, particularly for elderly people.

I suggested earlier that ageist constructions underlie the common assumptions that older people are particularly 'vulnerable' to the negative effects of crime and fear. With regard to financial victimisation, it is widely acknowledged that the legal framework relating to handling other people's money is extremely complex but lacks safeguards for vulnerable older people (Powell, 2001).

As with other characteristics which make older people vulnerable to victimisation, it is difficult to disentangle the age factor from other variables which mean that older people figure prominently among those for whom victimisation has a high impact. In terms of actual rates of victimisation, older people are at relatively low risk from crime (although elder abuse, which is not considered here as such, is certainly underreported) (Mawby and Walklate 1994).

Certainly, the analysis between of the relationship between older people, victimisation and the criminal justice system (See Brogden and Nighar, 2000) challenges the stereotype that the elderly are a homogeneous, vulnerable social group. Many citizens across the life course may feel vulnerable for a number of reasons. As this chapter demonstrates, what has been constructed as a 'problem' for elders i.e. being potential victims of crime, for the majority may not be a problem. Where the elderly are identified as the most vulnerable in our communities is in respect of abuse of people who are dependent upon their assailant for essential daily care and vulnerable to fraud (See Bennett et al 1997). Older victims tend to report that crime has a higher and long-lasting impact upon them compared to younger victims (Skogan, 1987).

The reason for lower victimization rates amongst the elderly are that women and older people avoid going out at night because they do not feel safe doing so. While they may be relatively unlikely to become victims of crime, their fears are understandable: if they are poor,

in poor health, isolated, house bound and if they feel vulnerable, their ability to withstand victimisation may be substantially reduced. As Powell (2013) explains the level of feeling unsafe among older people was conditional upon their level of deprivation and multiple deprivation increase fear levels. The combined determinants of gender, poverty and age result in potentially higher rates of fear and vulnerability amongst elderly women than in other social groups. Older people are more fearful of crime than other groups within society. More research is required to identify the interrelationships between age, neighbourhood, poverty and fear of crime and its contribution to the social exclusion of older people.

This article has explored 'age' as an important dimension of analysis. I have dissected its relationship to victimisation and contemporary criminology by focusing on particular representations and experiences of older people. I have traced the historiography of the concept of "victim" and contextualized the competing theories of victimology: science versus social constructionism. I have highlighted how in its original 'scientific' form, victimology examined the pathological characteristics of victims and how they "contributed" to their own victimisation. As a counter to this, I have traced the emergence of social construction of victimisation which looks at how society impacts on and shapes the construction of victimisation.

Finally, I suggest that the marginalisation of older people adds to hegemonic criminal justice practices leading to injustice, oppression and marginalisation in contemporary society. In order to prevent marginalisation and multiple victimisation, it is crucial to examine the role of victimological dominant assumptions (Morosawa, Dussich and Kirchhoff (2012), criminal justice policy and social practices. A fusion of theoretical inquiry and active participation of older people and victims in victim policy process and victimological research would address pervasive cultural values central to the empowerment-marginalisation nexus based on 'age' and victimization'.

So how can the relationship between later life, crime and victimology be addressed? In this paper, I have examined how and why age and ageist discourses are deployed in the study of crime and later life. As the reader, you may ask why the older victim is presented by media reports, government policy and in some research as the archetypal victim. Secondly, you may ask why criminologists, victimologists and government policy advisors have produced a wealth of literature on young persons and offenders but have neglected problematising age. One possible reason for the neglect of later life issues in all of the above is that youth as with the study of offenders unleashes the voyeur and allows us to reminisce about our own youth styles. In contrast the study of old age and crime as Pollak (1941), astutely observed approximately 60 years ago, evokes a different reaction:

“Old criminals offer an ugly picture and it seems as if even scientists do not like to look at it for any considerable amount of time....On the other hand, if the thesis of the interrelationship between age and crime is to hold, an investigation of all its implications has to yield results, and with the tendency of our population to increase in the higher age brackets, a special study of criminality of the aged is required” (1941:212).

If Pollak's view was accurate in 1941, it is even more so today, over sixty years later. With the elder prison population representing the fastest growing age group in our prison system, I have reached an important juncture in the disciplines of gerontology and criminology. Women and men in later life need improved health services, different types of housing, age-sensitive regimes, and a variety of aids when they become disabled. I have to recognise that the elderly inmate, due to the effects of ageing, has far different needs and places far different demands on a system that is designed for the younger inmate. But they also need a reason for

using these things. 'In our society the purpose of life in old age is often unclear.....Old age is seen as a 'problem' with the elderly viewed as dependants; worse still, they are often described as a non-productive burden upon the economy' (Powell 2013). Hence, it is not surprising that elders experience isolation and alienation when they are denied access to the sources of meaning valued by the society in which they live (Powell 2013).

3. CONCLUSION

For many years, both gerontologists and criminologists have concentrated their attention exclusively in their respective fields (Malinchak, 1980). In this article, I have synergised criminological and gerontological theory to understand and problematise the complexity of ageing, victimisation and crime and, in turn, place the needs of elders firmly on the research and policy agenda.

The evidence presented here demonstrates that although older people are portrayed as victims of crime, statistically they are least likely to be and the actuality of being a victim of crime in this respect is inversely disproportionate to the fear of crime. However, one must stress that the experience of *fear* is very real to the individual and thus makes measuring degrees of fear impossibility (Box et al 1988). Sparks (1992) rhetorically asks, 'What is a rational level of fear? In other words, I argue, that if *fear* is *experienced* then ultimately; it is *real*.

The consequences of Sparks' (1992) questions are immense: there is the creation of what Estes, Biggs and Phillipson (2004) describe as 'No Care Zones', where victim supports may disintegrate in the face of inadequate services and benefits for older people. On the other side, there may equally be the emergence of 'No Identity Zones', thus reflecting the absence of spaces in which to construct a viable identity for later life compared to other age groups (Phillipson and Biggs 1999).

Traditionally, questions concerning discrimination in criminal processing have focussed on the effects of factors such as gender, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, socio-economic status and age (for those between 10–18), but have neglected later-life issues. Their experiences have remained marginalized in the debates around policy, and how the criminal justice system responds to these changes remains yet to be seen. By theorising age, victimisation and crime I hope to dispel and challenge some of the myths surrounding later life, crime and the older victim.

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