Chapter 12: Victimology

In a rush to investigate crime, it is easy to become distracted by criminal behavior and motivation and forget the value of victims. Those with an interest in criminal profiling often remark how taxing it can be to see through the eyes of an offender, as though this is all there is to the process. Focusing too much on the offender is understandable, as traditionally the victim has not been the focus of criminal justice efforts, or even of the investigation. It is not easy to attend to the victim, and it can be emotionally and intellectually challenging.

There’s no question that focusing on the victim is the most difficult part of profiling. However, getting to know the victim of a crime is critical.

First, there are emotional challenges. The coping mechanisms of overtaxed, underpaid, and undervalued detectives, investigators, and forensic personnel involve continual personal detachment and dissociation from the victims and the things that have been done to them. The victim is compartmentalized and seen as an object, as evidence to be analyzed and catalogued. Maintaining this coping mechanism means we may lose our humanity, because we actively avoid or suppress information about the person as a victim. But when investigators take on a case, they must take on the whole case, including the victim and who he or she is. Investigators have the responsibility to do the best job possible, not just what is comfortable for them.

Second, there are political challenges. In some cases, the culture in which an examiner operates may openly encourage the marginalization, vilification, or deification of a particular victim population. When the profiler takes a stance at odds with the accepted view, then chances are the profiler will feel pressure to move the findings into the back corner, and may even be advised to stop generating findings at all. In other cases, the profiler may be asked to cast a victim’s actual history in terms of a popular view or stereotype.

These realities explain why the performance of a thorough victimology is not routine practice for many investigators. When done properly, the profiler will get to know the victim better than they know most people in their lives. Getting to know the victim is not emotionally safe, but it does prevent the profiler from employing stereotypes.

Victimology Defined

It is not uncommon to find individuals who are ignorant of the field of victimology. They have not heard the term, don’t recognize it as a formal area of study, and have no idea that it impacts on every case they examine.

Victimology is the scientific study of victimization, the relationships of victims to offenders, and the interactions between them. Most researchers trace the beginnings of victimology to Hans von Hentig and Benjamin Mendelsohn who both created a number of typologies for victims and victim-criminal relationships.

One common application of victimology is the idiographic and nomothetic study of violent crime and crime victims for the purpose of addressing investigative and forensic issues. This is referred to specifically as forensic victimology.

Why Study the Victim

A competent investigator will spend at least as much time getting to know the victim as any related offender. Death investigators and pathologists have known this for years and mandate this type of examination for every case.

Victimology is first and foremost an investigative tool, providing, context, connection, and
investigative direction. In an unsolved case where the offender is unknown, victimology also provides a suspect pool. The lifestyle and the activities of victims must be scrutinized to determine who had access to them, what they had access to, how and why they gained and maintained access, and where the access occurred. The explicit goals of forensic victimology are:

1. Help establish the context of the victim-offender relationship
2. Determine where the specific dangers were coming from in the victim’s life
3. Determine where the specific personal and environmental dangers were coming from at the time of the victim’s demise
4. Define the suspect pool
5. Narrow the suspect pool

If we can understand how and why an offender has selected known victims, then we may also be able to establish a relational link of some kind between the victim and the offender. These links may be geographic or related to work, schedule, school, hobbies, or through some other area. These connections help provide a suspect pool.

Furthermore, if we can understand how and why offenders have selected their previous victims, then we have a better chance of predicting the type of victim they may select in the future. Even if we discover that the offender’s victim selection is opportunistic, this is still a significant conclusion.

**The Victim as a Real Person**

Victimology is all about getting to know the victim as a real person. A first step is realizing that everyone leads multiple lives. At the least they have a professional or public life that is known to all, and they have a private life that is shared only with close friends and family. There is also a sexual life that each person lives as a function of his or her sexual relationships and preferences. In all of these lives there will also be variations and contradictions. Some will be narrow and focused, others will be broad and scattered. Some will be safe, and others will be risky. Some will be open, others will be closed.

Deification involves openly idealizing certain victims. They may be young schoolchildren, missing adolescents, or those who are already deified by the press and public opinion. Certain victims tend to be more politically or publicly sympathetic. This view facilitates rationalizations about time spent on certain cases while others suffer, and it does not allow for an unbiased investigation of the victim.

Deification has the capacity to accomplish the following:

1. Cause an incomplete victimology
2. Remove good suspects from the suspect pool
3. Provide coverage for the false reporter
4. Provide coverage for suspects who are family or household members

Vilification involves viewing or casting certain victim populations as worthless or disposable by their very nature. This presumes that it is OK, or at least not as bad, to commit crimes against people of certain lifestyles, races, origins, or social classes, as well as drug dealers, addicts, or runaways. This tends to be guided by an investigator’s subjective sense of morality. The end result may be investigative apathy.

Examples of vilified groups include:

1. The homeless or mentally ill
2. Homosexuals  
3. Minority populations within particular regions, such as immigrants and Native Americans  
4. Prostitutes  
5. Drug dealers  
6. Drug addicts  
7. Teen runaways who become prostitutes or drug addicts  
8. Individuals or particular religious beliefs  

These groups are marginalized either due to prejudice, to their criminal activity, or to the perception that they are contributing to their own demise.

Investigators who hold negative views towards certain victims may not feel that there is a need to investigate crime committed against them. Many serial offenders will exploit these weaknesses in attitude and choose their victim, in part, because certain views are held by the community.

Exposure Analysis  
One of the lenses used to examine the victim-offender relationship is the victim’s exposure. This is the amount of exposure to harmful elements experienced by the victim. It is determined by examining lifestyle exposure and situational exposure.

Exposure versus Blame  
The following terms and definitions are designed to help the profiler examine and describe the relationship of a victim to his or her lifestyle and environment, and of a given offender to that victim. They provide the profiler with a language to describe the facts of the case as established by the behavioral evidence. They provide insight into the defenses that a given offender is willing and able to defeat in order to achieve a goal.

It is important to remember that victims are not responsible for the predatory acts of offenders. This may seem obvious, but many people do blame the victim as being partially or wholly responsible for crimes committed against them. Groth details the following common myths regarding victims of sexual assault:

1. The victim in some way was party to the offense by being seductive or provocative.  
2. If the victim wanted to, he or she could have prevented the assault.

The choices victims make to ensure personal safety are only going to be sufficient for an offender of a certain skill level. Put another way, whether or not a certain victim will fall prey to a certain offender is not exclusively a function of the victim’s efforts to ensure personal safety. It is a function of the amount of time a particular offender is willing to put into his or her method of approach and method of attack.

Establishing victim blame does not add anything to an investigation. All people have vulnerabilities, no matter what level of harm their lifestyle exposes them to. Criminals are not entitled to commit crimes simply because people have a moment of vulnerability. This vulnerability is provided by an understanding of the difference between lifestyle exposure and situational exposure.

Exposure: The Victim’s Point of View  
Victim exposure is the amount of exposure to harmful elements experienced by the victim that we as profilers perceive for a given victim. It is not necessarily the offender’s perspective. It is subjective, depending on the knowledge and experiences of the profiler.
Differences in profiler knowledge and experience do not tend to account for the majority of varying opinions that exist regarding victim exposure. When there is disagreement between two profilers, the disagreement tends to stem from the thoroughness of the victimology. Many approach the subject with a great degree of subjectivity and prejudice arising from preconceived theories.

Another influence on a criminal profiler’s exposure analysis may be political. If the profiler feels that a certain victim type suggests a certain offender type, there is a danger that the profiler may tailor the analysis and ignore other relevant information.

**Categorizing Victim Exposure**

Criminologist Hans von Hentig had a progressive view of victims, openly suggesting that some contributed to their victimization because of elements that may or may not have been beyond their control.

Von Hentig originally classified victims into one of 13 categories, which could be described as a list of characteristics that increase victim exposure.

*The Young*

Von Hentig’s category refers to children and infants. Children have a greater potential to be exposed to harm than adults because they are weaker, have less mental prowess, have fewer legal rights, and are economically dependent on their parents.

*The Female*

Here von Hentig was referring to all women. Many western women are conditioned to believe that their value is tied to their sexuality. In addition, many women are physically weaker than men, and many have been culturally conditioned to accept male authority.

*The Old*

For this category von Hentig was referring to the elderly. Many of the elderly have the same vulnerabilities as children; they are often weaker, mentally less facile, and may be under someone else’s care.

*The Mentally Defective and Deranged*

According to von Hentig, this group includes the feeble-minded, the “insane,” drug addicts, and alcoholics. Those who suffer from any of these conditions have an altered perception of reality.

*Immigrants*

Here von Hentig refers to foreigners unfamiliar with a given culture. Those who travel to foreign places are exposed to gaps in communication and comprehension, which may expose them to confidence schemes, theft, abuse, and prejudice.

*Minorities*

By this category von Hentig means the “racially disadvantaged,” as he termed it, which really refers to prejudice.

*Dull Normals*

Here von Hentig was referring to what he called “simple-minded persons,” who may have the same types of exposure to harm as those who are mentally defective and deranged.

*The Depressed*

This category refers to people with various psychological conditions. Those who are depressed may be exposed to all manner of danger, intentional and otherwise. They may also take medication that
alters judgment and perception.

*The Acquisitive*
Here von Hentig was referring to those who are greedy and looking for quick gain. These people may suspend their judgment in the pursuit of financial or other types of gain.

*The Wanton*
In this category von Hentig meant promiscuous people. Those who engage in sex with a large number of other people are exposing themselves to disease and a variety of other personalities that may be supportive or destructive.

*The Lonesome or Heartbroken*
Here von Hentig was referring to widows, widowers, and those in mourning. People who are lonely or heartbroken are at greater risk for substance abuse and can be easy prey for con artists, the abusive, and the manipulative.

*The Tormentor*
Von Hentig was here referring to the abusive parent. All abusers expose themselves to the harm they inflict, the resulting angst, and the degree to which their victims fight back.

*The Blocked, Exempted, or Fighting*
In his final category, von Hentig included victims of blackmail, extortion, and confidence scams. Such victims may continue to suffer, as bringing the attention of law enforcement may be the very thing the victim wants to avoid.

These may be interesting and even useful classifications from a nomothetic point of view, but the idiographic victimologist must study each victim and determine the extent to which the classification had a bearing on actual harm.

Ultimately, then, the goal is to arrive at an understanding of victims in the context of their lifestyle and conditions.

The term low-exposure victim refers to an individual whose persona, professional, and social life does not normally expose him or her to the possibility of harm or loss. Medium-exposure victims are individuals whose personal, professional, and social lives can expose them to suffering harm or loss. A high-risk victim is one whose personal, professional, and social life normally exposes him or her to the possibility of suffering harm or loss.

*Victim Lifestyle Exposure*
Lifestyle exposure is the amount of exposure to harmful elements experienced by victims as a result of their usual environment and personal traits. Circumstances, habits, or activities expose an individual to harm or loss. Lifestyle exposure is thus a function of who the victim is and how he or she relates to the hazards the environment contains. The general personality traits that can increase victim lifestyle exposure include:

- Aggressiveness
- Anger
- Emotional outbursts
- Hyperactivity
- Impulsivity
- Anxiety
- Tendency towards addictive behavior
• Actual addictions
• Substance abuse
• Tendency towards self-destructive behavior
• Actual self-destructive behavior
• Phobias or irrational or inexplicable fears
• Difficulty with authority
• Space or privacy issues
• Passivity
• Low self-esteem
• Depression or hopelessness
• Negativity
• Emotional withdrawal
• Listlessness
• Need for attention or sympathy
• History of self-injury
• History of suicide threats or attempts
• Aberrant sexual behavior

These traits should be viewed in the context of the victim’s demographic and situational factors.

**Victim Situational Exposure**
Victim situational exposure is the amount of exposure to harmful elements experienced by the victim resulting from the environment and personal traits at the time of victimization. These can include:

• Victim’s lifestyle risk
• Victim’s state of mind or perception
• Time of occurrence
• Location of occurrence
• Number of victims
• Drug and alcohol use

**Exposure: The Offender’s Point of View**
Offender exposure is the general amount of exposure to discovery, identification, or apprehension experienced by the offender. It is determined by examining MO exposure and offender situational exposure.

The question is what obstacles the offender perceived, or considered, in acquiring a particular victim and avoiding identification and capture, and how did the offender plan to overcome those obstacles. To fully understand the nature and extent of offender exposure, it is necessary to categorize the exposure in terms of MO exposure and offender situational exposure.

**Modus Operandi Exposure**
MO exposure is the degree to which an offender’s modus operandi exposes him or her to discovery, identification, and apprehension. It is assessed by the determination and consideration of both precautionary acts and contradictory acts.

Examples include the following:

• Dark or poorly lit conditions
• Times during the day, late or night or early in the morning, when few people are around to witness offender activity
• Offense locations far away from where an offender resides
• Offenses where an offender abducts a victim to a remote or secluded location
• Availability

It is important to keep in mind that high-exposure victims are not equal to low MO exposure.

**High MO Exposure**

High MO exposure is a term that applies to offenders who evidence a low amount of skill, planning, and precautionary acts before, during, or after a crime. High MO exposure is also a term that applies to instances where the offender increases his or her chances of being recognized, identified, or apprehended by commission or omission.

**Offender Incident Exposure**

Offender situational exposure is the amount of discovery, identification, or apprehension experienced by the offender resulting from personal traits and environment at the time of the attack. It is not necessarily the perspective of the offender, who doesn’t operate with the same insights as the criminal profiler.

**Victimology: General Guidelines**

The NIJ (National Institute of Justice) Guidelines are a good place to start in terms of what is required for a victimology. However, profilers should not restrict themselves to checklists, nor should they treat anything as trivial; rather, they should analyze each characteristic until it is an exhausted possibility.

A checklist of preliminary victimological queries that have proven useful include:

1. Did the victim know the perpetrator?
2. Does the victim suspect any person? Why?
3. Has the victim a history of crime? A history of reporting crimes?
4. Did the victim have a weapon?
5. Does the victim have an aggressive personality?
6. Has the victim been the subject of any field [police] reports?

The following are some basic victimological guidelines that have proven useful when applied to actual casework. Gathering this information along with the careful examination of physical evidence provides the starting point for investigative activity.

1. Determine the victim’s hard physical characteristics (race, weight, height, hair color, eye color, etc.).
2. Determine the victim’s occupation or place of work, and shift schedule.
3. Compile the victim’s criminal history.
4. Compile a list of the victim’s daily routines, habits, and activities.
5. Compile a complete list of the victim’s family members with contact information. Interview each of them.
6. Compile a complete list of the victim’s friends with contact information. Interview each of them.
7. Compile a complete list of the victim’s coworkers with contact information. Interview each of them.
8. Compile the victim’s medical history.
9. Compile the victim’s psychiatric history, and interview all of the victim’s mental health care providers.
10. Compile a complete list of the victim’s medications. Compare this with the known toxicology for the victim.
11. Compile the victim’s financial history (credit card usage, tax returns, insurance policies, etc.).
12. Compile the victim’s educational history.
13. Compile a residence history for the victim (where he or she has lived, when, and with whom, etc.).
14. Spend time, when possible, with the victim’s personal items, in the personal environments (hangouts, work, school, home, bedroom, etc.). Examine any available photo albums, diaries, or journals. Make note of musical and literary preferences. Do this to find out who the victims seemed to believe they were, what they wanted everyone to perceive, and how they seemed to feel about their life in general.
15. Compile all available information regarding the victim's mobile phone, computer, and Internet usage. When available, at least the following should be attempted:
   - Determine the victim’s service providers.
   - Determine the victim’s e-mail addresses.
   - Examine the victim’s address books/contact database.
   - Examine the victim’s incoming and outgoing e-mail.
   - Examine all documents on the victim’s computer.
   - Determine the last known usage of the computer and various software applications.
16. Create a timeline of the victim’s last known activities, factoring in all witness statements and physical evidence.
17. Travel the last known route taken by the victim in whatever manner the victim used. Try to see that route from the victim’s perspective and then from the potential perspectives of the offender. Keep the perspectives separate.
18. Look for security video cameras along the victim’s route, or potential route, that may have documented the victim’s activities or even the actual crime.

Creating a Timeline: The Last 24 hours
Retracing a victim’s last known actions and creating a timeline are critical to understanding the victim as a person; understanding the victim’s relationships to the environment and to other events; and understanding how the victim came to be acquired.

The general purpose here is to become familiar with the last known activities of the victim, and to determine how a victim got to a place and time where the offender was able to acquire him or her. This timeline needs to be built from the ground up.

A good approach to creating this timeline of locations and events includes at least the following:

- Compile all available forensic and factual data.
- Compile all of the crime scene photographs.
- Compile all witness data.
- Create a timeline of events and locations.
- Create a map, as detailed as possible, of the victim’s route for the 24 hours before the attack.
- Physically walk through the victim’s last 24 hours, using a map and forensic evidence as a guide.
- Document expected background elements of the route in terms of vehicles, people, activities, professionals, and so on for the time leading up to, during, and after the victim was acquired. It is possible that the offender is, or was masquerading as, one of those expected elements.

Attempt to determine the following:

- The point at which the offender acquired the victim
- The place where the offender attacked the victim
- How well the attack location can be seen from any surrounding locations
• Whether or not the offender would need to get familiar with the area to know of this specific location or how to get to it
• Whether or not the acquisition of the victim was dependent on some sort of routine or schedule, and who could be aware of that schedule
• Whether or not knowledge of the route would be required or indicate presurveillance
• Whether or not this route placed the victim at higher or lower risk
• Whether or not the acquisition of the victim on that route placed the offender at higher or lower risk

**Investigate the Obvious**

It is important to investigate the obvious. Offenders may know the victim, be acquainted with him or her, or have some other connection, and this connections exists far more often than we are led to believe by the published research.

Investigate the obvious connections and proceed by questioning related assumptions against the victimology. If a fact cannot be established, it cannot be assumed.

**KEY TERMS**

*Deification:* in victimology, the tendency to idealize victims as innocent and virtuous. This can result in uncritical acceptance of evidence that supports this image, and blindness to evidence that does not.

*High-exposure victim:* an individual whose personal, professional, and social lives continuously expose them to the danger of suffering harm or loss.

*High MO exposure:* applies to offenders who evidence a low amount of skill, planning, and precautionary acts before, during, and after a crime.

*Lifestyle exposure:* the amount of exposure to harmful elements experienced by the victim resulting from their usual environment and personal traits.

*Low-exposure victim:* an individual whose personal, professional, and social lives do not normally expose them to a possibility of suffering harm or loss.

*Low MO exposure:* applies to offenders who evidence a high amount of skill, planning, and precautionary acts before, during, and after a crime.

*Medium-exposure victim:* an individual whose personal, professional, and social lives can expose them to a possibility of suffering harm or loss.

*Modus operandi exposure:* the degree to which an offender’s modus operandi exposes him or her to discovery, identification, or apprehension.

*Offender exposure:* the general amount of exposure to discovery, identification, or apprehension experienced by the offender.

*Offender situational exposure:* the amount of exposure to discovery, identification, or apprehension experienced by the offender resulting from his or her personal traits and environment at the time of the attack.

*Victim exposure:* the amount of exposure to harmful elements experienced by the victim.
Victim situational exposure: the amount of exposure to harmful elements experienced by the victim resulting from his or her environment and personal traits at the time of victimization.

Victimology: the scientific study of victimization, including the relationships between victims and offenders, the interactions between victims and the criminal justice system, and the connections between victims and other societal groups and institutions.

Vilification: in victimology, the tendency to view or cast certain victim populations as worthless or disposable by their very nature. This can result in uncritical acceptance of evidence that supports this image, and blindness to evidence that does not.

QUESTIONS
1. The specific goals of forensic victimology are to:
   a. Help establish the context of the victim-offender relationship
   b. Determine where the specific dangers were coming from in the victim’s life
   c. Determine where the specific personal and environmental dangers were coming from at the time of the victim’s demise
   d. Define the suspect pool
   e. All of the above*

2. Victimology is all about:
   a. Getting the know the victim as a real person*
   b. Getting to know the victim to release details to the media about risk
   c. Establishing the level of blame for victimization
   d. All of the above
   e. None of the above

3. Deification has the capacity to accomplish the following:
   a. Cause an incomplete victimology
   b. Remove good suspects from the suspect pool
   c. Provide coverage for the false reporter
   d. Provide coverage for suspects who are family or household members
   e. All of the above*

4. Examples of vilified groups include:
   a. The homeless or mentally ill
   b. Homosexuals
   c. Drug addicts
   d. University students*
   e. Runaways

5. Vilification involves:
   a. Seeing certain groups as worthless or more disposable*
   b. Seeing certain groups as more desirable
   c. Seeing certain groups as more to blame
   d. Seeing certain groups as less to blame
   e. None of the above

6. Which of the following is not one of von Hentig’s categories of victims?
   a. The young
   b. The female
   c. Immigrants
7. Examples of low MO exposure include all but which of the following?
   a. Dark or poorly lit conditions
   b. Times during the day
   c. Offense locations far away from where an offender resides
   d. Availability
   e. Revealing their identity and not cleaning up bodily fluids*

8. The amount of exposure to discovery, identification, or apprehension experienced by the offender resulting from personal traits and environment at the time of the attack is known as:
   a. Modus operandi exposure
   b. Victim incident exposure
   c. Offender incident exposure*
   d. Victim lifestyle exposure
   e. None of the above

9. **True** or **False**: Victimology is defined as the “scientific study of victimization, including the relationships between the victims and the offenders, the interactions between victims and the criminal justice system . . . and the connections between victims and other societal groups and institutions.”

10. **True** or **False**: A competent investigation will spend at least as much time establishing and examining victim history as it does the offender.

11. **True** or **False**: Victims are often to blame for the crimes that are committed against them.

12. **True** or **False**: Many criminal profilers are in the habit of approaching the victim with prejudice born of preconceived theories.

13. Based on their personal, professional, and social lives, prostitutes and police officers are both considered _________ exposure victims.

14. There are a series of rape/robberies committed against the homeless in the shelters of a particular inner city. None of the cases are assigned a detective by the police agency responsible for three months—on the heels of a newspaper article profiling one of the victims. When asked why no detective had been assigned previously, the police chief responded that the department has enough work investigating crimes against more productive citizens. This would be an example of ________________.

15. _______ exposure victims are those whose personal, professional, and social lives do not normally expose them to risk.

16. List three circumstances that can increase a person’s situational exposure, in general.

17. List three circumstances that can increase a person’s lifestyle exposure, in general.

18. List as many of the general personality traits that increase victim lifestyle exposure as you can.