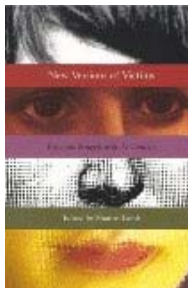


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Review - New Versions of Victims

Feminists Struggle with the Concept
by Sharon Lamb (Editor)
New York University Press, 1999
Review by Susan J. Brison, Ph.D.
Mar 20th 2000 (Volume 1)

It's a good thing Sharon Lamb isn't the publicist for the anthology she has edited, *New Versions of Victims*, as she begins her introduction by discussing all those groups who "won't like this book": the media, "look-at-me feminists" (e.g. Katie Roiphe and Camille Paglia), "victim feminists" (e.g. Ellen Bass and Judith Herman), and "some therapists who treat victims." So who *will* like this book? "Perhaps those thinkers, students, and therapists who fall through the cracks" will, Lamb tentatively suggests. I would say, without hesitation, that many of those who question the opposing views of "victimhood" currently prevalent in the media will like this book. Those who are distressed by the rift between so-called "pro-sex" and "pro-victim" feminists will welcome the complicated and nuanced views of the contributors. And many others, who may not *like* this book, will nonetheless be challenged, provoked, and ultimately enlightened by it.

The authors in this volume grapple with such questions as: How can we conceptualize victimhood—especially those varieties experienced by women—in a way that does justice to the agency and strength of those who are labeled "victims"? How can we acknowledge that there are some insights to be gained from the backlash against feminist accounts of victimization while continuing to recognize—and fight against—the very real harms of rape, battering, harassment, and other forms of sexual abuse suffered by very many women in our society?

The contributors—Janice Haacken, Claire Renzetti, Nicola Gavey, Lynn M. Phillips, Sharon Lamb, Carol Rambo Ronai, Jeanne Maracek, and Chris Atmore—are all feminists and professors (of psychology, anthropology, sociology, and women's studies). Some are also activists and some are clinical psychologists. Their essays—on topics including the incest survivor movement, women's use of violence, problems defining "rape," adult-teen relationships, and the backlash against radical feminist theory—share the

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virtues of accessibility, interdisciplinarity, and necessary complexity. They are also noteworthy for the candor and intellectual integrity of the authors who contextualize their contributions, situating themselves in the debates about women's victimization by revealing their "personal" experiences, theoretical orientations and, at times, intellectual uncertainties.

I learned from all of these thoughtful essays. The one I found most interesting is the editor's own contribution, "Constructing the Victim: Popular Images and Lasting Labels." It is also the one that struck me as most provocative. While I share Lamb's conceptual concerns and political aims, I found myself arguing with much of her chapter. Occasionally, it seems to me, she falls into the trap of invoking the needlessly polarized terms of the popular debate about women's victimization (e.g. Are women victims? Or are they agents?) even while attempting to undermine them. The victimization/agency dichotomy appears to inform her view that attributions of "pathology and long-standing suffering rob victims of agency, and victims become reactors rather than actors." (p. 109) And although I agree with Lamb's criticisms of those who construe sexual abuse as a mental health problem *rather than* a social one, her own construal of sexual abuse as a social problem *rather than* a mental health one is equally problematic. Her analysis could be improved by replacing *either/or* thinking about these issues with *both/and* thinking: Even those with long-lasting psychological sequelae of abuse are *both* agents *and* victims. Sexual abuse is *both* a mental health problem *and* a social one.

Lamb believes that a clinical diagnosis of an abuse victim as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is "[o]ne of the worst thieves of victim agency/victim resiliency" (p. 111), one that comes perilously close to labeling the victimized woman as "damaged—or 'damaged goods' as the older, viler saying used to go." (p. 112) But a diagnosis of PTSD (and subsequent treatment) can be empowering to a victim whose efforts to recover have been hindered by her (and society's) belief that her injuries are 'all in her head'. It can be more enabling to learn to work around—or to overcome—the symptoms of PTSD than it is to pretend that they are simply not there. Unless one accepts an extreme form of mind-body dualism, holding that anything in the realm of the neurological is mechanistically determined, and therefore inevitable, whereas anything in the realm of the mental is under our control, it is implausible to suppose that such a medical diagnosis condemns to helpless passivity those so diagnosed.

I heartily endorse Lamb's political stance on women's victimization, which means acknowledging that abused women are victims of "something endemic in our culture—male violence." I agree that this requires the realization that "women can't go through life expecting not to be abused without some change in society" as well as the imperative to "take action to change perpetrators and change men, starting with the development of boys." But I disagree that such changes can be effected only through our "expressing less caretaking worry about many victims, in contrast to the extensive care we clinical psychologists, therapists, and feminists have of late lavished on them." (p. 133) Fortunately, we do not have to choose between advocating necessary care for victims and agitating to change those political conditions that led to their victimization.

Susan Brison is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Dartmouth College, where she also teaches in the Women's Studies Program. She has published in the areas of Philosophy of Law and Social and Political Philosophy and is currently completing a book on the aftermath of sexual violence.

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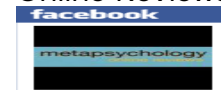
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