

**The Consequences of Language: A Review of Random Violence: How We Talk about New Crimes and New Victims**

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Review of Random Violence: How We Talk about New Crimes and New Victims

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*Ticktock. Bang! Ticktock. Wham! Ticktock. Smash!* According to the latest Federal Bureau of Investigation statistics, a violent crime occurs every nineteen seconds in America (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 1998). Despite perfunctorily advising readers to digest this information with caution, an indelible impression is stamped in our minds - that violent criminal victimizations are inevitable; that it is just a matter of time before we become a grim statistic ourselves; and that we are witnessing the decline of western civilization right before our very eyes. Are you still incredulous and in need of more compelling evidence? Check out the newspaper headlines and stories being aired on national television. Just think for a moment about the recent pandemic of school shootings, the multitude of serial killers, innumerable satanic cultists, countless child snatchers, insatiable NAMBLA members, sexual predators, Bloods and Crips, celebrity stalkers, carjackers, home invaders, Halloween sadists, disgruntled employees on shooting rampages, drive-by shooters, pistol-packing kids, freeway shooters, criminals motivated by hatred, and the growing army of remorseless evildoers out there, somewhere, waiting to claim more innocent victims. This catalogue of horrors and villains validates an objective reality for most - the world is a dangerous place because violent victimization *could happen* to anyone, anytime, and anywhere.<sup>1</sup>

Joel Best's central thesis is that words, language, and ideas are important and consequential. At this critical juncture in history, how we currently talk about crime (e.g., the introductory paragraph to this review essay) is damaging because it warps our understanding of the problem. Because this type of public discourse shapes our beliefs, it can only hamper society's ability to address the causes of these social problems in a meaningful way.

Random Violence begins by identifying common linkages among a mishmash of social problem claims that have emerged within the past two decades. This is no easy task, but the author persuasively argues that most "new crimes" are presented as acts of "random violence" because, quite simply, it has broad appeal.

Despite the obvious political differences between liberals, conservatives, feminists, fundamentalists, and others, "the frightening imagery of random violence can be tailored to fit almost any ideological agenda" and, more importantly, avoids any discussion of sticky race or class issues (Best, 1999: 22). After all, the very term implies that violent crimes are all too common and senseless events that are the sure signs of social deterioration. In response, Best systematically presents evidence and arguments to the contrary. First, most acts of violence are not governed by a democratic process since differential risks of violent victimization exist. For instance, the empirical literature suggests that violent crimes disproportionately claim more male victims than females (except for rape), more poor victims than the affluent ones, more blacks than whites, and more urban dwellers than rural residents. Second, violent incidents are generally not pointless or senseless. Focusing on the most sensational crimes conceals the ordinary motives for much violence such as jealousy, money, power, prestige, and saving face. Finally, the author argues that increases in violent crime have been greatly exaggerated. In fact, small declines in violent victimization rates reported by the National Crime Victimization Survey since its inception support this contention.

Much of the book analyzes the various social, historical, cultural, and institutional conditions, factors, and forces that give life to many social problem claims. Naturally, this raises a number of theoretically interesting questions. For instance, how are specific events (incidents) transformed into social problems (typifying instances) in the first place? Though claims are commonly assumed to originate with activists, some social problems are manufactured by the media as well. The freeway violence scare of the mid-1980s is a prime example of a social problem invented by the media. Two unrelated freeway-shooting incidents in a single weekend caught the media's attention because, as the author asserts "journalists have a rule of thumb: the third time something happens, you have a trend (Best, 1999: 31)." As macabre as it may seem, the press waited in eager anticipation for another shooting incident in order to capitalize on an emerging social problem. Undeniably, fierce competition exists between news organizations to be the first in reporting a trend but how far are members of the press willing to go? Sometimes extraordinary efforts are taken to secure lead coverage. For example, the pressure to report groundbreaking news prompted the *Los Angeles Times* to prepare a feature article on freeway violence as a nascent social problem several weeks before another incident even occurred.

However, media coverage alone is not enough to sustain interest in a particular social phenomenon and as a result many "new crimes" simply fade away. Social problem claims must garner support from other social sectors to achieve the ultimate form of legitimization, that is institutionalization. The author identifies four social sectors - mass media, activists, government, and experts - primarily responsible for sustaining this interest.

Theoretically, each social sector interacts with the others to create an institutionalized outcome. Presented in an intuitively appealing matrix format, "new crimes" generally offer mass media novel stories to report, activists new issues to maintain interest in a broader social movement, government a chance to conspicuously respond to threats against the public's interest, and experts an opportunity to ply their knowledge. The mass media offer publicity for activists, government, and experts alike. Other connections, not mentioned here, brilliantly illustrate the reinforcing links that benefit the four social sectors in the promotion of new crimes." When the links among the social sectors remain intact, then the probability of achieving an institutionalized response increases.

Several chapters are devoted to describing the parallel rise of "new victims" associated with "new crimes." Within the past twenty-five years an astounding number of "new victim" categories have been created. For instance, Americans now speak about victims of drunk driving, stalking, bullying, sex addiction, eating disorders, elder abuse, spousal rape, date rape, acquaintance rape, hate crimes, post-traumatic stress disorder, codependency, credit card dependency, and sexual harassment, to name a few (Best, 1999: 95). Why has there been an explosion in victim categories in recent history? The author suggests that the increased awareness and concern for victims is a function of historical events that have shaped contemporary attitudes. In particular, social movements fighting for the rights of the elderly, children, prisoners, mental patients, animals, blacks, women, homosexuals, disabled, and others have drawn attention to victims. Within this same period the victims' right movement was gaining significant ground among various institutions, and the ranks of the helping professions began to swell. Taken together these historical developments have generated the contemporary ideology of victimization. The author argues that the constellation of themes underpinning the victimization ideology invariably grants an assortment of "new victim" categories, no matter how farfetched they might truly be. For example, as one theme suggests, all claims should be respected because denying legitimacy could have devastating consequences (e.g., secondary victimization). In the era of political correctness, the nearly unchallengeable (or rarely challenged) themes of the victimization ideology allow "new victim" claims to proliferate.

Social problems inevitably call for social policies. Again, how we talk about crimes, victims, and policies has a number of consequences. Best devotes an entire chapter to America's generalized preoccupation with declaring war on social problems (e.g., drugs, poverty, crime, cancer, inflation, etc.). The war metaphor is particularly attractive for politicians because, quite simply, it is powerful rhetoric. Our leaders rely on this strong metaphor in order to create support for their social policies; however, there are two primary reasons these policy agendas are bound to fail. First, the war metaphor frames the issue in deceptively simple terms. "The melodrama of the war metaphor, its insistence that

social problems can be understood as a straightforward struggle between good and evil, constrains discussion of alternative policies (Best, 1999: 156)." Second, the war metaphor invites unrealistic expectations of total victory within a relatively short period of time. In the best of cases, effective social policies make modest improvements over an extended amount of time. When the war is neither completely triumphant nor short in duration, then support for the campaign eventually wanes. The social problem, however, remains.

The final chapter examines four connections between new social problem claims and well-established claims. First, new claims tend to rely on available cultural resources with successful track records. There is an intimate familiarity in the use of language, rhetoric, orientations, and tactics employed by advocates for new social problem claims. Second, social problems that have achieved a recognized status generally pass through three stages: classification (naming the phenomenon as a distinct problem), domain expansion (employing inclusive definitions), and diffusion (problem spreads geographically and temporally). Third, social problems adopt (and sometimes modify) orientations in order to force people to think about issues in a certain manner. Finally, social problem claims are often linked to history. For example, concern over certain social problems, such as gangs, may wax and wane or get repackaged as another related issue (e.g., drug panics that repeatedly shift the focus of attention from one drug to another).

Random Violence is a magnificent contribution to the social construction of social problems literature. Joel Best skillfully weaves connections among a diverse set of social problem claims, employing a truly interdisciplinary approach. The lucid analysis draws upon an impressive range of resources to support the central thesis that language is consequential. The language we select to talk about social problems shapes the way we think about and subsequently address society's problems. Effectively tackling our problems demands that we first come to terms with how we talk about them.

### References

Federal Bureau of Investigations. (1998). Crime in the United States, 1997. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Part of the opening paragraph utilizes an effective rhetorical technique, frequently employed by journalists, activists, academicians, politicians, and others promoting a social problem, explicitly designed to "distort in order to disturb" (Best, 1999: xv). This author wishes to acknowledge that much suffering and human misery does indeed occur, and that the sardonic subtext is not indicative of any callous insensitivity toward the plight of real victims.