

## Book Review

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Stringer, R. (2014). *Knowing victims: Feminism, agency, and victim politics in neoliberal times*. London, England: Routledge. 185 pp. \$49.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-415-64333-7.

**Reviewed by:** Amanda Barusch, *University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand; University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA*

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In *Knowing Victims*, sociologist Rebecca Stringer interrogates contemporary discourses of victimhood—both popular and academic. She notes that some feminist literature has adopted a neoliberal stance that runs counter to its aims, and she proposes an alternative construction of victimhood.

The work explicates the paralyzing binary at the heart of neoliberal victim theory (good victims who blame themselves vs. bad victim-agents who blame others). This illuminates both policy and practice discourses in social work. Consider, for instance, the TANF recipient who's told she needs to take personal responsibility for pulling herself out of poverty; or the rape victim, told she is accountable for the crime. Stringer successfully argues that these rhetorical approaches typify the neoliberal agenda that dominates so much policy making (and thought) in our era and shifts our gaze away from the structural causes of oppression.

With an erudite touch and careful detail, Stringer begins her argument with 1990s critiques of feminism. She focuses on works by Christina Hoff Sommers, Katie Roiphe, and Naomi Wolf (presumably because they are typical of the genre). Stringer explains that these authors use a “zoom lens effect” (taking isolated incidents or quotes out of context) to reproduce “the victim-blaming structure of neoliberalism’s personal responsibility system,” which distracts from sociopolitical considerations through its energetic promotion of personal responsibility (p. 20). Of course, this move studiously ignores the extent to which neoliberal policies have, themselves, victimized women around the world.

Next, Stringer turns to sexual harm, arguing that an emphasis on agency risks placing women who have been raped in a blameworthy position by assigning them responsibility for avoiding or escaping their fate. It also implicates rape prevention programs that, by suggesting the crime *can* be prevented, place responsibility at the victim’s doorstep. In a compromise move, rape crisis feminists skirt the binary by introducing the survivor role, through which the victim assumes responsibility for minimizing the debilitating effects of rape.

Nietzsche surfaces in the argument’s next stage, as Stringer prepares her masterful appropriation of his concept, *ressentiment*. Setting aside its misogynous tendencies, she favors engagement with Nietzschean philosophy in a way that converts resentment from an unnatural feminine (slave) reaction to a natural (master’s) response to victimization. Where some, like Joan Cocks, frame resentment as a “recitation of . . . suffering” (p. 98), Stringer sees the fuel for progressive mobilization in the resentment and the knowledge possessed by victims.

This book will seriously complicate a reader’s understanding of the term “victim.” In it, we meet the Christian *victima*, a “good victim” with “pure innocence,” who accepts the demand for meekness that accompanies each compassionate gesture; we meet “power victims,” degenerate types,

who demand and complain (p. 11); we meet victims who blame themselves for their victimization; others, who flaunt their suffering to victimize their oppressors; and, finally, the knowing victim, who channels her resentment and knowledge into social action.

Social work professionals and scholars who appreciate a critical approach will find much to appreciate in this work. It offers a significant contribution to our scholarship, practice, and teaching. For my part, the book helped explain my vague discomfort with the popular term, “resilience.” *Knowing Victims* helped me see how this construct diverts attention from the social causes of suffering by offering the tantalizing suggestion that individuals might somehow be inoculated from their ill effects. If only we could impart resilience, we wouldn’t have to tackle the pernicious social ills of inequality, sexism, and oppression.