



Mini Review

Trauma moralization in victimization fields: shame, self-blame, and victim blaming

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ABSTRACT

Shame, self-blame, and victim blaming are central dynamics in victimization processes, especially in contexts of interpersonal violence and coercive relationships. This mini review explores these experiences not as isolated individual reactions, but as processes shaped within relational, social, and institutional contexts that influence recognition, credibility, and meaning after trauma. Drawing on victimology, psychotraumatology, and phenomenological-Gestalt theory, the paper introduces the concept of “trauma moralization” to describe how traumatic suffering may progressively become interpreted in moral terms, shifting attention from violence and relational asymmetry to the victim’s perceived responsibility, adequacy, or credibility. The paper examines victim blaming, self-blame, and secondary victimization as interconnected field processes operating across subjective, relational, institutional, and socio-cultural dimensions. Particular attention is given to embodied and relational aspects of shame and self-blame, including bodily contraction, hypervigilance, interruptions in contact, and restriction of agency. Finally, the paper discusses the clinical and ethical implications of a non-moralizing and dialogical approach aimed at supporting recognition, restoring contact, and reopening possibilities for agency and meaning after trauma.

Keywords

Trauma moralization, Shame, Self-blame, Victim blaming, Secondary victimization, Victimization processes, Phenomenological-Gestalt approach.

ABSTRACT IN ITALIANO

La vergogna, l’auto-colpevolizzazione e la colpevolizzazione della vittima costituiscono dinamiche centrali nei processi di vittimizzazione, in particolare nei contesti di violenza interpersonale e nelle relazioni coercitive. Questa mini review esplora tali esperienze non come reazioni individuali isolate, ma come processi modellati all’interno di contesti relazionali, sociali e istituzionali che influenzano il riconoscimento, la credibilità e il significato attribuito all’esperienza dopo il trauma. Attingendo alla vittimologia, alla psicotraumatologia e alla teoria fenomenologico-gestaltica, il lavoro introduce il concetto di “moralizzazione del trauma” per descrivere come la sofferenza traumatica possa progressivamente essere interpretata in termini morali, spostando l’attenzione dalla violenza e dall’asimme-

Citation: Romano, R. Trauma moralization in victimization fields: shame, self-blame, and victim blaming. *Phenomena Journal - International Journal of Psychopathology, Neuroscience and Psychotherapy*, 8(2), 49–55.

Editor in Chief: Raffaele Sperandeo, PhD, MD

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Received: January 14, 2026

Accepted: June 4, 2026

Published: June 26, 2026

tria relazionale alla responsabilità, all'adeguatezza o alla credibilità percepite della vittima. L'articolo esamina la colpevolizzazione della vittima, l'auto-colpevolizzazione e la vittimizzazione secondaria come processi di campo interconnessi che operano attraverso dimensioni soggettive, relazionali, istituzionali e socio-culturali. Particolare attenzione è dedicata agli aspetti corporei e relazionali della vergogna e dell'auto-colpevolizzazione, inclusi la contrazione corporea, l'ipervigilanza, le interruzioni del contatto e la limitazione della capacità di agire. Infine, il contributo discute le implicazioni cliniche ed etiche di un approccio dialogico e non moralizzante volto a favorire il riconoscimento, ristabilire il contatto e riaprire possibilità di azione e di attribuzione di significato dopo il trauma.

Parole chiave

Moralizzazione del trauma, Vergogna, Auto-colpevolizzazione, Colpevolizzazione della vittima, Vittimizzazione secondaria, Processi di vittimizzazione, Approccio fenomenologico-gestaltico.

INTRODUCTION

This mini review explores how shame, self-blame, and victim blaming develop within victimization processes and traumatic relational contexts. Rather than treating these experiences as isolated intrapsychic reactions, the paper examines them as processes shaped within relational, social, and institutional contexts that influence recognition, credibility, and meaning after violence.

Drawing on victimology, psychotraumatology, and phenomenological–Gestalt theory, the paper proposes the concept of trauma moralization to describe the shift through which traumatic suffering gradually becomes interpreted in moral terms as a matter of guilt, inadequacy, or personal defect.

From a Gestalt field perspective, experience emerges within a dynamic organism–environment field in which meaning is continuously co-created relationally [1]. In these situations, the focus progressively moves away from violence and relational asymmetry and toward the victim's behavior, credibility, or identity.

Against this backdrop, the paper situates the recent Italian legislation on femicide (Law of December 2, 2025, No. 181) not as an object of legal analysis, but as a symbolic and institutional horizon for how trauma enters the social field, between recognition, generalization, and the risk of moralization. The law can be read as an attempt to acknowledge the specificity of gender-based violence and to counter denial and minimization; however, like any normative dispositif, it operates through categories and definitions and thus carries a structural risk: transforming lived traumatic experience into a typological object and, indirectly, into a moral issue. The critical point is not the

norm itself, but how it is mobilized within cultural and institutional frames that may select credibility and legitimacy on the basis of implicit expectations.

Critical victimology has shown that victim recognition is mediated by normative criteria and social selection mechanisms [2, 3]. Credibility does not follow automatically from harm but from conformity to implicit models of a “recognizable victim,” while discursive and institutional frames regulate the conditions for access to recognition [3]. In this context, victimization fields are structurally shaped by power asymmetries that condition speech, protection, and legitimation [4]. Italian victimology has described victimization as a dynamic, relational process, placing secondary victimization at the center – not as an additional event, but as a continuation of trauma through contextual responses that generate delegitimation and blame [5]. As traumatic suffering enters the social field, it is often interpreted through implicit moral expectations and judgments [6].

Psychotraumatology has shown that interpersonal trauma disrupts meaning systems and bonds of trust, and that social and institutional responses characterized by doubt or blame obstruct repair and foster chronicity [7]. Trauma is also embodied: it involves not only memory and narrative but also affect regulation, bodily states, and dissociative processes. Chronic shame and traumatic exposure may also affect affective regulation and implicit bodily organization [8]. Shame may involve experiences of global self-devaluation and exposure that deeply affect relational positioning and self-perception [9, 10]. Shame is often experienced bodily before becoming fully narratable. Muscular tension, bodily contraction, freezing, hypervigilance, lowered gaze, or difficulty sustaining

spontaneous contact may become part of how traumatic moralization is lived. Accordingly, shame and self-accusation cannot be reduced to “dysfunctional thoughts”; they should be understood as complex adaptive outcomes – often somatically rooted – within relational fields experienced as threatening or judging.

From a phenomenological–Gestalt standpoint, these dynamics can be read as field perturbations and disruptions of the contact process [11, 12]; under asymmetry and moral constraints, agency narrows and experience tends to organize into configurations dominated by shame and guilt. This supports the proposal of an integrated victimological and phenomenological–Gestalt reading of trauma moralization, taking femicide legislation as a symbolic–institutional horizon and discussing clinical and ethical implications in terms of preventing secondary victimization and restoring agency.

METHOD

This contribution is a theoretical and conceptual mini review integrating perspectives from victimology, psychotraumatology, and phenomenological–Gestalt theory. The review follows a narrative and interpretive approach to develop an integrated conceptual framework rather than to provide a quantitative synthesis of empirical findings. The literature search was conducted using PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The review primarily considered theoretical, clinical, and victimological contributions published between 1975 and 2025. The main keywords included: “victim blaming”, “self-blame”, “secondary victimization”, “trauma”, “shame”, “moralization”, “Gestalt field theory”, “contact interruptions”, and “phenomenological Gestalt therapy”. Sources were selected for their theoretical relevance to the topics explored in the paper, with particular attention to studies on victim recognition, embodied trauma, shame processes, relational asymmetry, and field dynamics in traumatic experience.

TRAUMA MORALIZATION: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“Trauma moralization” refers to the process through which an experience of violence is progressively removed from its re-

lational dimension and field rupture, and reinterpreted in terms of responsibility, guilt, or personal defect. In this shift, trauma is no longer only what happened; it becomes what it supposedly “says” about the person who suffered it. Suffering turns into judgment, and the victim risks being implicitly positioned as the accused. The concept of the ideal victim shows that recognition is not automatic but depends on implicit models of a “pure” and narratively coherent victim [2]. It has also been shown that institutions and public discourse do not merely “record” trauma; they co-produce its visibility, credibility, and treatability [3]. Within this framework, trauma moralization can be understood as the effect of a dispositif that shifts attention from power asymmetry to the person’s adequacy, from the violent relationship to the victim’s conduct. While trauma moralization overlaps with victim blaming and secondary victimization, the concept specifically refers to the process through which traumatic suffering progressively becomes interpreted through moral categories concerning the victim’s adequacy, credibility, responsibility, or worth. This process does not emerge only at the individual level but develops within broader social and institutional contexts that shape how trauma is interpreted. The field tends to neutralize the disturbance caused by violence by producing morally reassuring narratives that restore a compromised symbolic order through the attribution of responsibility, suspicion, and the redistribution of blame onto the victim. The link to secondary victimization is especially clear: moralization is one of its most insidious forms because it transforms access to protection into a pathway of moral verification (coherence, credibility, “respectability”). From a psychotraumatology standpoint, if interpersonal trauma breaks meaning systems and bonds of trust, institutional suspicion and blaming are not “neutral”: they can consolidate helplessness and block reparative processes [7]. This consolidation also occurs at the bodily level: shame and self-blame can stabilize as embodied states (closure, freezing, hypercontrol) that are not reducible to cognitive judgments [13]. From an integrated victimological–phenomenological–Gestalt viewpoint, trauma moralization can be understood as a process through which victimization fields regulate traumatic disruption rather than as a simple evaluative distortion. When violence introduces a radi-

cal rupture in predictability and relational order, the social and institutional field faces a perturbation that exceeds its habitual forms of integration [7, 13]. In response, the social field attempts to restore coherence after the disruption produced by violence: relational asymmetry is translated into a personal trait, relational fracture into a conduct problem, violence into a credibility issue [1, 3, 4]. Victim blaming, self-blame, and institutional typification thus appear not as separate phenomena, but as interconnected ways through which traumatic experiences become socially reorganized and stabilized, while containing the disturbance produced by trauma at the cost of relocating its burden onto the victim [2, 4-7]. In this sense, moralization is not an accident of judgment but a structural mode of managing victimization through which social and institutional fields organize recognition, legitimation, and treatment, sometimes producing and reproducing secondary victimization [1, 4, 5]. These dimensions of the field should not be understood as separate or fixed levels, but as interconnected processes continuously influencing one another across subjective, relational, institutional, and socio-cultural experience [14].

These articulations can be synthetically mapped across different field levels (socio-cultural, institutional, relational, and subjective), as summarized in Table 1.

VICTIM BLAMING AS A SOCIAL DEVICE

Victim blaming is often described as a bias or an individual judgment error; however, victimological approaches interpret it as a social device for regulating the field [1, 4]. Interpersonal violence disrupts shared assumptions (safety, predictability, trust) and generates collective anxiety. These dynamics may also reflect broader sociocultural processes that regulate vulnerability, legitimacy, and emotional expression within social fields. The field then tends to “close the fracture” with narratives that restore a moral order: if blame can be placed on the victim, the world becomes symbolically controllable again and vulnerability can be kept at a distance [2, 15]. In this logic, victim blaming not only targets the victim but also organizes the context, sustaining the reassuring illusion that there is a safe separation between “those who suffer harm” and “those who are safe.” Access to recognition depends on conformity to implicit models of the “ideal victim”; those who deviate (ambivalence, ties to the perpetrator, context, or non-linear behaviors) are more exposed to suspicion and blame [3]. These dynamics are often embedded in institutional practices, where demands for narrative coherence and “appropriate” behavior can become moral se-

Table 1. Mapping trauma moralization processes across different field levels.

FIELD LEVEL	PROCESS	DESCRIPTION	FUNCTION IN THE FIELD	REFERENCES
Socio-cultural	Victim blaming	Implicit or explicit attribution of responsibility to the victim for the experienced event	Reduction of collective anxiety; restoration of a moral order and an illusion of control	[2-4, 15]
Institutional	Secondary victimization	Traumatic reorganization of experience through practices of evaluation, credibility filtering, and typification	Normalization of violence; transformation of recognition into a moral verification pathway	[1, 4, 5, 19, 20]
Relational	Trauma moralization	Transformation of relational rupture into an issue of guilt, defect, or personal inadequacy	Symbolic stabilization of the field after perturbation	[1-3]
Subjective	Self-blame	Internalization of blame and self-accusation as a relatively stable configuration of experience	Maintenance of minimal coherence of meaning and bond with the field at the cost of self-accusation	[6-10]
Phenomenological-Gestalt	Contact configurations (introjection, retroreflection, confluence)	Organization of experience through modes of contact interruption in asymmetrical and judging fields	Closure of field disorganization and reduction of uncertainty, with restriction of agency	[1, 11, 12, 17, 18]

lection [4]. Gestalt phenomenology allows victim blaming to be described as an attempt by the field to restore a “good form” after perturbation: blaming the victim produces a stable (though unjust) explanation, reduces anxiety, and rapidly closes meaning disorganization [1, 11, 12]. The cost is substantial: it prevents recognition of the relational and structural nature of violence, normalizes asymmetry, and prepares the ground for the internalization of accusation. Moralization, victim blaming, and self-blame are therefore not mere cognitive “distortions,” but social and relational responses through which the surrounding context attempts to restore stability after violence [1, 2, 4], while shifting the weight of violence from relational asymmetry onto the person who suffered it [3, 7], setting the stage for the transition from victim blaming to self-blame [15].

SELF-BLAME AS THE INTERNALIZATION OF MORALIZED FIELDS

Self-blame is the subjective counterpart of victim-blaming: self-accusation as the internalization of blame and a relatively stable configuration of experience. A distinction is commonly made between behavioral and characterological self-blame; the latter, centered on being “fundamentally wrong,” is more strongly associated with chronic shame, diminished self-worth, and impaired agency [15]. From a victimological and relational perspective, however, self-blame does not arise in a vacuum: it develops within fields saturated with moral judgments and normative expectations that filter credibility and legitimacy [1, 4]. Following interpersonal trauma and betrayal, guilt and shame can function as meaning-repair devices: if the fault is mine, the world remains orderly and experience can be held within an apparently coherent frame [7]. In traumatic relational contexts, self-blame may coexist with dissociative processes and fragmented forms of self-experience [16]. From a victimological–Gestalt standpoint, self-blame can be understood as a contact configuration produced within victimization fields marked by power asymmetries and moral constraints, organized through contact interruptions, such as introjection, retroflection, and confluence [1, 11, 12, 17]. Introjection may appear in the unquestioned internalization of blaming messages and moral judgments. Retrof-

lection may emerge when anger and protest are redirected toward the self rather than toward the violent relational context. Confluence may make it difficult to distinguish one’s own experience from the expectations and accusations of the surrounding field. In this framework, self-accusation is not an individual distortion but a way in which the field is organized within relational and institutional contexts that can generate or consolidate secondary victimization processes [1, 4]. Its embodied dimension confirms that self-blame is not only a narrative but also a relatively stable mode of regulating experience, involving bodily and affective levels of subjectivity [14]. Spontaneous engagement with the context becomes restricted, and the person may experience an increased vulnerability to moral judgment, prompting a continuous monitoring of the environment [18]. Self-blame is frequently accompanied by bodily and relational changes. The person may become chronically self-monitoring, emotionally contracted, or excessively oriented toward anticipating judgment and disapproval. Contact with others may lead to a loss of spontaneity and to becoming organized around control, justification, or fear of exposure.

SECONDARY VICTIMIZATION AND THE INSTITUTIONAL FIELD

Secondary victimization describes the reactivation and reorganization of trauma through social and institutional responses. Victimization can be understood as a process involving the perpetrator, the victim, and the institutional field in which the event is handled; within this field, practices of listening, verification, and protection, although necessary, may produce delegitimation and blame, turning help-seeking into a new scene of exposure [5]. Not all victims have the same access to recognition, because credibility depends on implicit models of the “deserving victim” [3]. Institutions do not operate neutrally: they co-produce narratives, define standards of “good testimony,” and select what is speakable and what becomes suspicious [4]. Institutional systems may also shape forms of self-surveillance and normalization that become progressively internalized within subjectivity, regulating which emotional expressions are socially sanctioned [19]. This entails a structural risk: reducing lived process to case and profile

and turning traumatic complexity into required coherence. This mechanism operates as a real form of power, where institutional frameworks define the boundaries of the speakable, casting doubt on anything that deviates from established standards [20]. Interpersonal trauma can also be understood as a struggle for recognition, suspended between truth and denial, testimony and silence [7]. When the institutional field responds with suspicion or minimization, it reactivates the very helplessness dynamic that characterized the original violence. In phenomenological–Gestalt terms, the institutional field tends to “freeze” experiential fluidity into typified forms: if trauma is a rupture of meaning and contact, translating it into procedural grids can produce a closed field in which the person can move only within predefined roles [1, 11, 12]. The person may progressively experience institutional encounters as emotionally constricting, hypervigilant, or frozen, with a corresponding reduction in spontaneity and relational trust. From this perspective, secondary victimization can be understood as a field pathology: a systemic effect of the institutional organization of traumatic experience rather than the outcome of isolated ill intent [1, 4].

CLINICAL AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS: TOWARD A NON-MORALIZING FIELD

If moralization, victim blaming, self-blame, and secondary victimization are field processes, clinical and institutional intervention cannot be reduced to correcting symptoms or individual beliefs; it must interrogate and transform the relational and symbolic conditions that organize trauma in moralized forms. From a phenomenological–Gestalt perspective, the primary task is not interpretation but the construction of a sufficiently safe field in which the contact process can restart, suspending judging frames and implicit blame criteria [1, 11, 12]. A non-moralizing field does not imply neutrality toward violence, but rather a dialogical and phenomenological stance capable of recognizing traumatic experience without reducing it to moral evaluation or predefined categories of legitimacy. Shame and self-blame should not be treated as “errors” to be corrected, but as outcomes of coercive or invalidating field organizations, consistent with psychotraumatology’s emphasis on recognition in trauma repair [7].

This shifts the center of gravity: from evaluating the person to reconsidering the relational and institutional conditions that enabled violence and subsequently moralized its effects. Ethically, the central stake is removing trauma from the moral tribunal. As critical victimology and psychotraumatology show, any implicit demand for coherence, adequacy, or conformity to the model of the “good victim” risks reproducing the same logic that turns the wound into proof and experience into suspicion [2-5, 7]. An integrated victimological and phenomenological–Gestalt approach can function as a critical regulatory principle, oriented toward preventing secondary victimization and keeping the singularity of lived experience open. As self-blame gradually loosens, the person may begin to recover differentiation, bodily presence, relational trust, and a less defensive experience of contact. Experiences previously organized around shame, fear, and self-surveillance may slowly become more open to recognition, agency, and relational legitimacy. In this horizon, the recent Italian femicide legislation (Law of December 2, 2025, No. 181), while representing a significant signal of institutional recognition, also highlights a structural risk present in any dispositif: translating experience into category. For legal recognition not to become a new reduction of meaning, it should be accompanied by practices capable of safeguarding the singularity of experience and protecting it from moralizing typification.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper proposed an integrated reading of shame, self-blame, and victim blaming as field configurations within victimization processes. The central assumption is that these phenomena cannot be adequately understood if reduced to intrapsychic distortions; rather, they should be conceptualized as outcomes of relational, social, and institutional fields that interpret traumatic experience through implicit moral expectations, producing a moralization process in which suffered violence risks being transformed into the person’s fault. Victimology highlights the processual nature of victimization and its structural vulnerability to secondary victimization [2, 5], while analyses of the “ideal victim” and institutional frames show that recognition is selective and conditioned by implicit models of legitimacy [3, 4]. Psychotraumatology further demonstrates that repair depends on

recognition and that trauma is also embodied in affect regulation and bodily states [7]. A phenomenological–Gestalt contribution allows these processes to be read as field perturbations and contact disruptions, in which guilt and shame organize as relatively stable configurations in coercive and judging fields [1, 11, 12]. In this perspective, normative and institutional frames—including femicide legislation—are part of the field that organizes trauma: tools for protection and recognition, but also potential producers of typification. This supports the need for a clinically and institutionally grounded non-moralizing orientation that restores trauma as suffered harm, reopens the space of contact, and supports agency and meaning. Keeping the singularity of lived experience open is not only a clinical choice but an ethical stance against the risk that the victim may once again become judged rather than recognized.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

FUNDING

This study received no external funding.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing does not apply to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Rosaria Romano: Conceptualization; Methodology; Writing – Original Draft; Writing – Review & Editing.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE STATEMENT

The author used artificial intelligence tools exclusively for language and grammar editing of the manuscript.

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