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## Why Victimology Should Stay Positive – the Ongoing Need for Positive Victimology

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*This paper presents the need for positive victimology and its unique contribution to victimology. Victimology presented a shift in attention and awareness in practice, research and theory, by focusing on victims of crime and of abuse of power, and on victims' rights and victims' services. Positive victimology indicates a more specified shift in attention and awareness, within the larger shift of victimology. This shift stands in line with positive psychology, positive criminology and the idea of victims' victimology. It denotes an approach to provide the following, as much as possible: 1. A wide range of social responses to the victims and their victimization that victims can experience as positive, 2. Positive outcomes of healing and recovery for victims, and 3. Positive integration of victims. Within each of those, positive victimology suggests a pragmatic coordinated system that ranges from definitions of negative poles to those of positive ones. When moving towards the positive pole at any given coordinate, a sense of justice is an important factor that might reduce the impact of the harm. Support is also a crucial factor and at the very positive pole, stands human, inter-personal love.*

**Keywords:** integration, positive Victimology, recovery, victims' rights.

### Introduction

Victimology deals with bad experiences, with victimization and pain, possibility of victimization, harm caused by victimization and various responses to victimization. Victimization might be defined as human-made act that causes

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harm and suffering and invades into the self of the victim at various levels (Herman 1992; Ronel 2008; Kirchhoff 2010). Categorically, victimization is a negative experience and it is a main focus of the science of victimology.

Surprisingly enough, although victimization is as old as humanity, and the Bible portrays it with Cain and Abel story, and although the Bible itself raises the voice of Abel, the "first victim" ("the voice of thy brother's blood cries unto me from the ground", Genesis 4: 10), this voice of victims was silenced time and again through history. Not only their voice, but the victims themselves, as individuals and groups, almost disappeared in too many social responses to abuse of power. Victimology attempts to change this.

Victimology is a new science. It called for and presented a shift in attention and new awareness, that is, the appearance of the victim as an independent individual (or group), with voice, opinions, needs, hopes and expectations (Kirchhoff, 2010). Victimology is rarely neutral in its morality and values. By its very nature, victimology aims for an improvement for victims in that which is perceived to be positive by them. Most writings in victimology, either overtly or as a subtext, to a certain degree aspire to any improvement in anything that deals with victims or victimization, as an expected remedy to the very negative experience that lies at the root of victimology. In a relatively short period victimology succeeded to bring about overt changes in legal and social systems that represent the necessary shift in awareness and attention. More and more practicing victimologists, researchers and academicians apply their growing knowledge of victimology in various fields (e.g., academy, international and local legislations, legal practice, victim assistance and therapy for victims, media coverage and more) (Lindgren, Nikolić-Ristanović 2011).

Nevertheless, victimology is still a young and developing discipline (Fattah, 2014), and as such, it is still struggling for its place while surrounded by more established systems that struggle to keep their power. Therefore, too many times we still see that, although the daily application of the above described shift in attention might present an acknowledgment of the victims, it less recognizes their subjective needs, voice, wishes and opportunities (Ben-David, 2000). Therefore one may claim that the challenge of victimology is still valid, that is, to provide another shift, a more specified one, within the greater shift of attention already achieved. Positive victimology attempts to meet this challenge. Continuing positive psychology (Seligman, 2002), positive criminology

(Ronel, 2015) and the idea of victims' victimology<sup>1</sup> (Ben-David, 2000), positive victimology indicates a more specified shift in attention and awareness, that can be described as an approach to provide, *as much as possible*: 1. Wide range of social responses to the victims and their victimization that victims can experience as positive; 2. positive outcomes of healing and recovery for victims, and 3; positive integration of victims. Following I will describe these in details.

## **Positively experienced social response to victims**

There seems to be a wide agreement about the need to supply victims with as much positive experience as possible. As van Dijk (2014: 118) said: "Treating crime victims with consideration and respect is, so to speak, 'the least we can do.'" But to what extent does this statement reflect the actual experience of victims? The reaction towards victims by individuals and by various social agents, whom we may call "victimologists by practice" (e.g., members of the criminal justice system), usually covers a wide range of possibilities (Lindgren, Nikolić-Ristanović, 2011), of which not all are respectful for victims (van Dijk 2006; Levy, Ben-David 2008; Gekoski et al. 2013). For example, in a recent research project (Pugach et al., paper in preparation), that focused on direct family members of victims of murder, and studied their experience of both the legal system and the media in Israel, we concluded that separately and probably not intentionally, both systems repeatedly harmed the victims. According to the victims they were harmed time and again, to the point of silencing and re-victimizing them, in a way that we defined as "lingual injury". Well, no one is surprised. Unfortunately, we know it and are somehow even accustomed to it. Respectively, Shapland claimed "creating a criminal justice system more attuned to the ways in which victims (and witnesses) are able to deal with it in today's insecure world is clearly difficult" (Shapland, 2010: 369). Groenhuijsen and Letschert added (2014: 209): "It is well known that mass media belong to the latter category of agents responsible for a lot of hardship for large numbers of victims of crime".

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<sup>1</sup> Victims' victimology was proposed by Ben-David (2000) as an attempt to meet the "...need for a victim's internally understood victimology, parallel to feminine feminism (as understood from the female experience), that will serve as a bridge between the humanistic victimology and the academic discipline, between victimology as a social movement and victimology as science, and between victims' suffering and the theoretical study of the phenomenon", Ben-David, 2000: 55.

Victimology attempted and still works hard to bring a shift in victims' position. At the very basis of victimology lies the awareness of secondary victimization as Kirchhoff stressed: "It cannot be overemphasized that avoidance of secondary victimization should be prime goal of criminal justice systems" (2010: 116). Wemmers (2013) clearly showed how the degree of secondary victimization is related to the recovery of victims. Although, during the last decades we witnessed major changes in many countries concerning attention to victims and their rights that we may define as positive (Lindgren, Nikolić-Ristanović, 2011), my claim here is that we should go further in emphasizing this shift. Albeit a growing awareness and remarkable improvement, the reaction to victimization by various social systems might still suffer of being inadequate and insufficient at times, even when known legal rights of victims are kept. Thus the objective legal and social means to improve victims' position, even when practiced (which is unfortunately still instable), do not always meet their subjective needs and wishes (Ben-David 2000; Gekoski et al., 2013). Although victims of abuse of power are now recognized as valid agents with legitimate rights, nevertheless this recognition does not always acknowledge their full sense of agency and can deprive them of human unwritten rights. As said, a more specified shift is needed.

Positive victimology adds a new concept to the important "rights" and "means" vocabulary – namely a positively experienced reaction, which denotes a specified shift within the wider shift already taken by victimology. Accordingly, since the event or chains of events that are defined as victimization or as an abuse of power are always experienced as negative, the very natural remedy for it begins with a positively experienced reaction. I am almost sure that such a shift is generally shared by most declared victimologists, however there is a need to re-emphasize it – victims deserve social reactions that attempt to prevent secondary victimization, to keep their rights, to provide them with needed means, and also, equally important, to provide them with positive experiences as much as possible under the circumstances. The positive experience is not only expressed in the "what" – e.g., what rights are kept – but also by the "how" – e.g., how are these rights kept? And how are they experienced by victims? What language do victims meet – e.g., a legal objective one or a warm human one (Luria et al., 2014)? Our findings from the above mentioned new study (Pugach et al., paper in preparation) confirm this claim – our participants expressed a wish for a considerate human reaction that they would perceive as positive. The underlying assumption is that posi-

tive experiences can be as influential on individuals, families and community as negative ones and at times 'the good' can overcome 'the bad' (Fredrickson 2001; Ronel 2006; Ward et al., 2007; Ronel 2013).

Having said that, one may argue about the use of the value laden term "positive". To clarify, positive victimology suggests a pragmatic coordinate-like system that runs from definitions of negative poles to those of positive ones. Concerning the reaction to the victims, the individual experience of victims marks these coordinate – from a negative pole of a harming experience of victimization (and secondary one as well) through an experience of having right and receiving needed means to the pole of positively experienced reaction that contains the rights and means but simultaneously goes beyond as suggested above.

### **Positive outcomes of healing for victims**

A "positively experienced reaction" is a subjective definition. It might be that for some individuals a positive experience may be harmful. For example, survivors of past victimization may find themselves abusing substances or falling into substance addiction (Ben-David, Goldberg, 2008). For them, letting them drug themselves might be perceived as positive. But is it really positive? In my clinical work I meet it very often – former victimization goes together well with current heavy substance abuse that relieves an emotional pain but leads into unmanageable life. From the standpoint of these individuals, at least at the earlier stages of their substance abuse, it is a positive experience that might calm their inner chaos. Is it a positive victimology practice to assist these individuals to maintain their abuse, even if it has harmful consequences on their life? Or to assist a young woman in cutting herself whenever she confronts stress, to get some relief beyond the physical pain? Positive victimology, as I understand it, is by no mean neutral to such issues. Therefore, the positively experienced reactions should be limited to those inter-personal or personal reactions that at-least do not add any harm and preferably have *healing potential* for direct and indirect victims. That is, positive victimology is aimed towards healing the wounds caused by the victimization event (or events) at any level (Ronel, 2008): individual, family or community. Healing marks the aspired positive pole, while staying in the powerless experience following the victimization (Ronel, 2008), is considered here as the negative

pole. In addition, it also aims towards a process of recovery that might continue beyond healing the direct wounds of victimization (Brende, McDonald, 1989; Brende, 1993). Although, unfortunately, some wounds of victimization cannot be wholly healed, the direction of healing can improve existing circumstances and might initiate a journey of recovery.

The second shift in attention that indicates a specified objective is that of healing and recovery that are perceived as valid rights for victims. Positive victimology emphasizes healing as a basic right of victims and a social duty of any reaction, as well as indicating recovery as an enduring possibility (Herman, 1992). In addition, positive victimology targets healing as a research topic and attempts to provide theories of change, growth and healing, e.g., theories on forgiveness and its role and limitations (Hart, Shapiro, 2002) or theories on mourning processes that include possibilities of growth (Balk, 1999; Marrone, 1999) and theories on the growing field of post-traumatic growth (Ronel, Elisha 2011).

### **Positive integration of victims**

The third shift towards more specified attention that I want to propose here as representative of positive victimology, is that of integration. More often than not, victimization involves an experience of separation and to a certain extent an experience of being alone (Ronel, 2008). This sense of separation may be experienced during the victimizing event, or by a non-accepting social reaction as well as by the victim's tendency to keep the victimization in secret. Victims' blaming (Levy, Ben-David 2008) or non-accepting reactions of law-enforcement agents may increase this sense of separation (Luria et al., 2014). A major part of the victim's identity is formed around this sense of separation (Ronel 2008; Batson 2013). Therefore, a positively experienced, healing-aimed reaction should attempt to *increase the experience of integration* at any stage after victimization (Ronel et al., 2013). The integration reaction is a necessary attempt to heal the separating and isolating nature of victimization. It is the direction of recovery. While separation and disintegration at any level might indicate the negative pole of a vector, the positive pole is indicated by a growing sense of integration. Consequently, research in positive victimology should target integration initiatives and their various

components as a sound topic for studies, to generate a theory on integration of recovering victims.

Following the experience of positive criminology (Elisha et al., 2012), positive victimology suggests three levels of integration (Ronel, Toren, 2012) – inter-personal, intra-personal and spiritual. On the inter-personal level, positive victimology calls for social actions of inclusion which can prevent or decrease a sense of isolation. While a certain degree of inter-personal separation experience is sometimes inevitable following victimization, a well-planned social reaction might minimize such an experience, and this is a requirement set up by positive victimology. Many times inter-personal reactions after victimization increase the experience of separation and by doing so they further increase the suffering of direct and indirect victims (Dancig-Rosenberg 2008; Lindgren, Nikolić-Ristanović 2011). Positive victimology attempts to increase the awareness of the high need for inter-personal inclusion following victimization, to develop means of such an inclusion and to establish theoretical, research-based and practical knowledge of inter-personal inclusion.

On the intra-personal level, positive victimology calls for knowledge and practice aimed at integration of the victimized self. Unfortunately, the experience of being victimized many times creates a typical process of formation of a victim identity that includes a certain experience of powerlessness (Ronel, 2008). Moreover within this identity there is an experience of a chaotic self (Batson, 2013). This chaotic self might be re-organized in a struggle that attempts to avoid future victimization by minimizing any perceived risk. Consequently the individual might become self-centered in a self-protective, unhealthy manner. A process of re-integration of the self is needed as an integral part of the recovery process. In this sense, a high degree of self-preoccupation, that represents self-centeredness, marks a negative pole, while a growing self-integration and an ability to “let go” of oneself indicates the positive one.

In addition, positive victimology carries a spiritual vision of a process directed towards exploration and unification with a power greater than oneself (Brende, 1993). Previous research confirms positive victimology assertion that traumatic events and negative experiences can lead to positive changes, despite the inevitable pain involved. Such a change is associated with positive psychological adaptation, and may lead to a spiritual transformation (Balk 1999; Marrone, 1999). It is a process of growth beyond the boundaries of the

everyday struggle of recovery into new possibilities for the self. Recovering victims that experience powerlessness often face an existential crisis; such a crisis may open new directions, amongst is the spiritual development. An experience of greater spiritual unification provides individuals with new meaning and vision, sometimes never experienced before (Ronel, 2008). Positive Victimology indicates this vision as a potential positive opportunity.

### **Conclusion – Towards whom is the positive specified shift of victimology directed?**

Clearly, the positive specified shift in attention and awareness is firstly and mostly directed towards individuals and groups who were harmed and suffered from an abuse of power. Positive victimology attempts to bring about a significant improvement in their post victimization experience. Since positive victimology struggles for and with victims to their best, it acknowledges what they know, want or experience and can open wished possibilities for them.

Obviously again, positive victimology is aimed at victimologists. It aspires to emphasize a shift within established victimology. One may well assume that most features of the shift indicated by positive victimology are known and accepted by most victimologists. However, constructing these features as a whole perspective titled positive victimology may add innovation even to experienced victimologists. Academicians and researchers are welcome to add the positive victimology's specifications into their writings, teaching and studies, to further support this growing perspective.

However, I think that positive victimology carries its strongest message to the various fields of practice that victims might meet following the victimization event or events. Above I defined those practitioners who work with victims as "victimologists by practice", or we may define them as applied victimologists (Ronel, 2014). Positive victimology suggests a code of practice for practitioners who provide victims' services and assistance at any level, and also indicates a plan for practice, that target healing, recovery and integration as I described in details. Implanting principles of positive victimology into everyday practice with victims is my wished vision of the future of positive victimology.



The vision of positive victimology indicates a general movement on the imaginary negative to positive system of coordinates. When moving towards the positive pole at any given coordinate, a sense of justice is an important factor that might reduce the impact of the harm. Support is also a crucial factor and it may be self-support or receiving support by others and also it is marked by giving support. Still, at the very positive pole, to my understanding, stands something else that signifies an inspiration of the positive, that is, love. I suggest love as the ultimate opposition to victimization, or even better to say, the end of victimization and oppositions. Somehow the role of love is not yet fully explored in modern science, including victimology, and my vision for the future of Positive Victimology includes it as a valid topic of exploration and practice. My belief is that the more love we can provide or experience, the better the positive is represented.

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## **Zašto viktimologija treba da ostane pozitivna – stalna potreba za pozitivnom viktimologijom**

U ovom radu je analizirana potreba za pozitivnom viktimologijom i njen jedinstven doprinos viktimologiji. Razvoj viktimologije je doprineo preusmeravanju pažnje i svesti u praksi, istraživanjima i teoriji, fokusirajući se na žrtve kriminaliteta i zloupotrebe moći, prava žrtava i službe za podršku žrtvama. Pozitivna viktimologija donosi još specifičniji zaokret u posvećivanju pažnje i nivou svesti, u okviru već postojećeg velikog pomaka koji je načinila viktimologija. Ova promena je u skladu sa pozitivnom psihologijom, pozitivnom kriminologijom i idejom viktimologije koja pripada žrtvama (eng. victims' victimology). Ona predstavlja pristup koji, što je više moguće, teži da obezbedi: 1. širok spektar društvenih odgovora na potrebe žrtava i njihovu viktimizaciju, a koje žrtva može doživeti kao pozitivne; 2. pozitivne ishode oporavka za žrtve; i 3. pozitivnu integraciju žrtava. U okviru svakog od ovih ciljeva, pozitivna viktimologija predlaže pragmatičan sistem poput koordinatnog sistema, koji polazi od definisanja negativnih i ide ka pozitivnim delovima sistema (koordinatama). Prilikom pomeranja ka pozitivnim polovima (stranama) na bilo kojoj datoj koordinati, osećaj za pravdu je važan faktor koji može da umanji nanetu štetu. Podrška je takođe ključni faktor, koji na potpuno pozitivnom kraju podrazumeva humanost i ljubav među ljudima.

**Ključne reči:** integracija, pozitivna viktimologija, oporavak, prava žrtava.