



The Role of Victimology in Promoting Peace in Western and Non-western Countries

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Abstract: Victimology has traditionally developed within criminology and criminal justice, whereas peace studies has focused primarily on war, security, conflict resolution and the prevention of armed violence. This article brings these fields together by examining how victimological knowledge can contribute to positive and sustainable peace in Western and non-Western contexts. Drawing on victimology, restorative justice, transitional justice and peace studies, it develops a conceptual framework connecting victimisation with recognition, safety, truth, accountability, reparation, recovery, victim agency, institutional reform and guarantees of non-recurrence. Particular attention is given to Jan J. M. van Dijk's contributions to making hidden victimisation visible, challenging passive constructions of victimhood and recognising victims as rights-holders and social actors. The article compares Western emphases on individual rights, empirical victimisation research, trauma-informed services, procedural justice and institutional accountability with relational and communal approaches that foreground collective suffering, historical memory, land, spirituality, social responsibility and the restoration of relationships. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Rwanda's Gacaca courts are examined to illustrate both the possibilities and risks of culturally embedded justice and reconciliation. These cases demonstrate that truth-telling can support acknowledgement and reconstruction but may also expose victims to insecurity, coercion or retraumatisation. The article further argues that victimisation must be addressed across individual, family, community, intergroup, institutional and historical-structural levels. Treating individual trauma without transforming discriminatory institutions, unequal power relationships and narratives that legitimise revenge may relieve suffering while leaving conditions for renewed violence intact. It concludes by proposing a global victimology of peace: an empirically grounded, culturally pluralistic and victim-informed approach that regards victims as participants and agents in justice, social reconstruction and the prevention of future victimisation.

Keywords: victimology, peacebuilding, positive peace, victim agency, restorative justice, transitional justice, transformative justice, collective victimization, reparations, non-recurrence, relational justice, Jan J. M. van Dijk

INTRODUCTION

Peace studies and victimology developed largely as separate academic fields. Peace research traditionally concentrated on war, diplomacy, international relations, conflict resolution, security, and the prevention of armed violence. Victimology, by contrast, developed primarily within criminology and examined people harmed by crime, their relationships with offenders, their experiences with criminal justice institutions, and the social consequences of victimisation.

Yet the two disciplines address closely related questions. Wars produce victims. Colonialism and political repression produce victims. Terrorism, genocide, ethnic cleansing,

forced migration, torture, sexual violence, hate crime, and communal conflict produce victims. Moreover, the consequences of such violence can persist across families, communities and generations (Hirsberger, 2018).

The absence of fighting therefore does not necessarily mean that a society has achieved peace. A ceasefire can stop immediate violence while leaving behind unresolved grief, fear, humiliation, dispossession, inequality, impunity and competing historical narratives. These unresolved consequences can become ingredients for renewed conflict.

This distinction parallels Galtung's (1969) differentiation between negative peace—the absence of direct violence—and positive peace, which also requires attention to structural conditions that produce preventable suffering.

Victimology contributes to peacebuilding precisely because it asks what happens **after people have been harmed** and what victims require for justice, recovery and prevention of future victimisation.

This position corresponds closely with contemporary transitional-justice thinking. The United Nations increasingly conceptualises transitional justice not simply as a retrospective response to atrocities but as a strategic instrument for people, prevention and peace.

A useful starting proposition is therefore: Victimology contributes to peace by transforming the consequences of violence into processes of recognition, truth, justice, reparation, recovery and prevention.

FROM VICTIMISATION TO PEACEBUILDING

Victimology provides a particularly important bridge between the individual and structural levels of peace. Traditional victimological research frequently begins with an individual: **What happened to this person?**

Peacebuilding requires additional questions:

1. Why did it happen?
2. Who else was affected?
3. Which institutions made the victimisation possible?
4. How has the violence changed relationships between groups?
5. What must change to prevent repetition?

Consequently, peace-oriented victimology can be represented as a sequence:

Victimisation → recognition → truth → justice → reparation → recovery → reconciliation → institutional change → prevention → sustainable peace

This sequence should not be interpreted as a rigid linear process. Societies frequently move backwards and forwards between these stages, and victims themselves may want different outcomes.

Importantly, justice cannot be reduced to punishment. United Nations approaches to transitional justice combine truth-seeking, criminal accountability, reparations and

guarantees of non-recurrence. These mechanisms are considered mutually reinforcing rather than substitutes for one another (United Nations, 2010, 2023).



Figure 1: Victimology as a Bridge to Peace (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a9d1764-fd50-83ed-9885-a265f5fa5135>)

RECOGNITION: MAKING VICTIMS SOCIALLY VISIBLE

One of victimology's most fundamental contributions to peace is **recognition**.

Violence is frequently accompanied by denial. Governments may deny atrocities; perpetrators may minimise their responsibility; dominant groups may redefine victims as enemies; and communities may remain silent about sexual violence, torture or disappearances. Victimological research documents experiences that official histories may neglect. Recognition matters because victimisation concerns not only physical injury but also dignity and social identity (Méndez, 2016; Van Dijk, 2009). Victims frequently want society to recognise:

- that something happened;
- that it was wrong;
- that their suffering matters;
- that responsibility exists;

- and that they have rights rather than merely needs.

This principle has increasingly entered international transitional justice. Contemporary approaches emphasise recognition of victims as **rights-holders**, alongside rebuilding civic trust (United Nations, 2023). Recognition therefore has a peacebuilding function. It challenges the denial, silence and competing myths that can perpetuate antagonism.

TRUTH-SEEKING AND HISTORICAL MEMORY

A second contribution concerns **truth**.

Victim testimony can reconstruct what happened during periods of conflict or oppression. Truth commissions, oral-history projects, victim surveys, archives, memorialisation projects and community hearings can produce knowledge that would otherwise disappear (Hayner, 2011). Victimology can contribute scientific methodologies for documenting:

- types of victimisation;
- numbers and characteristics of victims;
- psychological and social consequences;
- institutional responsibility;
- patterns of discrimination;
- victim-offender relationships;
- community consequences;
- and unmet victim needs.

Truth has a potential peacebuilding function because conflicting communities frequently possess radically different narratives about the same history.

Acknowledging victim experiences does not automatically produce reconciliation, but systematic denial makes reconciliation considerably more difficult.

The UN human-rights framework consequently connects truth, justice, reparations, memorialisation and guarantees of non-recurrence. Memorialisation is important not simply for remembering suffering but for examining contemporary discrimination, exclusion and abuses of power that may reproduce historical patterns (United Nations, 2023).

JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Victimology also contributes to peace by examining what victims mean by justice. A narrow criminal-justice model can assume: crime → prosecution → punishment → justice

Victimological research complicates this model. Victims may seek punishment, but they may also seek truth, acknowledgement, apology, restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, institutional reform or assurances that what happened to them will not happen to others. Peacebuilding therefore requires multiple dimensions of justice:

Dimension	Victimological question	Contribution to peace
Retributive justice	Who should be held accountable?	Challenges impunity
Restorative justice	How can harm and relationships be repaired?	Rebuilds relationships
Reparative justice	What should victims receive?	Addresses consequences of harm
Procedural justice	Were victims treated fairly?	Builds institutional trust
Transitional justice	How should societies address mass abuses?	Connects justice and political transition
Transformative justice	What structures produced victimisation?	Addresses root causes

Victimology therefore prevents peacebuilding from treating justice merely as the prosecution of offenders.

REPARATIONS AS PEACEBUILDING

Reparations provide another important connection between victimology and peace.

Reparations can include: **restitution + compensation + rehabilitation + satisfaction + acknowledgement + guarantees of non-recurrence.**

International human-rights frameworks explicitly recognise these multiple dimensions of reparation (United Nations General Assembly, 2005).

Compensation alone is insufficient when the conditions producing victimisation remain intact. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has emphasised that reparations may acknowledge victims' suffering but cannot necessarily transform structural discrimination, poverty or inadequate public services unless accompanied by measures addressing underlying conditions and non-recurrence (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2008).

This distinction is particularly important for historical victimisation associated with colonialism, slavery, dispossession and discrimination.

Peace-oriented victimology therefore asks not merely: **"How much compensation should the victim receive?"**

but also: **"What must society change so that this victimisation does not occur again?"**

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE: FROM PUNISHMENT TOWARDS REPAIRING HARM

Restorative justice represents perhaps the clearest meeting point between victimology and peacebuilding. Instead of asking primarily:

Which law was broken and how should the offender be punished?

restorative approaches ask questions such as:

1. Who was harmed?
2. What harm occurred?
3. What does the victim need?

4. Who is responsible for repairing that harm?
5. Can damaged relationships be reconstructed?

Restorative programmes may involve victim-offender mediation, family or community conferencing, restorative circles and other facilitated processes. The UNODC's international handbook presents restorative justice as a major component of contemporary criminal-justice practice (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020).

These principles have considerable relevance to peacebuilding because violent conflicts damage relationships as well as individuals. However, restorative justice must remain genuinely victim-centred. Reconciliation cannot ethically mean requiring victims to forgive perpetrators. That distinction becomes especially important when examining non-Western peace traditions.

WESTERN APPROACHES TO VICTIMOLOGY AND PEACE

Modern academic victimology largely developed within European and North American criminological traditions. Western approaches have made major contributions in several areas.

They have helped establish victims' rights, compensation programmes, trauma-informed services, victim-impact procedures, restorative justice, international criminal justice and transitional justice.

Western victimology has also been influential in demonstrating **secondary victimisation**—the additional harm that police, courts, hospitals, governments, media or other institutions can inflict on victims through disbelief, humiliation, exclusion or insensitive procedures. This insight has direct peacebuilding relevance (Orth, 2002; Walklate, 2018).

A victim who is ignored or mistreated by post-conflict institutions can experience the new political order not as peace but as another form of injustice.

Consequently, procedural fairness matters for political legitimacy (Tyler, 2006).

Western transitional-justice mechanisms have increasingly incorporated victims into criminal proceedings, truth commissions and reparations programmes. Victim participation is now widely regarded as an important measure of the legitimacy and effectiveness of transitional justice (Méndez, 2016).

Yet Western victimology also has limitations when applied universally.

Its traditional emphasis on the **individual victim** may inadequately capture forms of harm experienced collectively by families, clans, Indigenous peoples, ethnic communities or colonised populations.

NON-WESTERN PERSPECTIVES: RELATIONAL VICTIMOLOGY

Many non-Western traditions conceptualise harm within a more relational framework.

The distinction should not be exaggerated: neither "Western" nor "non-Western" societies constitute homogeneous categories.

Nevertheless, many African, Indigenous, Asian and other traditions have historically placed stronger emphasis on communal relationships, collective responsibilities and restoration of social harmony (Metz, 2007; Murithi, 2006).

From such perspectives, victimisation can damage several interconnected relationships:

individual ↔ family ↔ community ↔ ancestors ↔ land ↔ institutions ↔ future generations

Peace consequently involves more than treating an individual's psychological symptoms or prosecuting an individual offender.

It may require repairing relationships between families and communities, restoring land, conducting rituals, acknowledging ancestors, rebuilding collective dignity or re-establishing community membership.

This provides an important corrective to excessively individualised victimology.

Ubuntu and South Africa

The African philosophy of **Ubuntu** provides an important illustration.

Ubuntu is commonly associated with relational personhood—the idea that human identity is formed through relationships with others (Metz, 2007). Harm to one person therefore also damages relationships within the community.

This philosophy influenced discussions surrounding South Africa's transition from apartheid and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998).

The TRC created public opportunities for victims to recount violations and contributed to documenting abuses that had previously been denied or concealed. Its approach connected truth, acknowledgement and reconciliation rather than relying exclusively upon criminal prosecution.

From a victimological perspective, this represented an important innovation: **victim testimony became part of national reconstruction.**

Ubuntu-oriented interpretations similarly emphasise restoration of victims, offenders and social relationships rather than punishment alone.

However, the South African experience also demonstrates an important danger.

Victim-centred peacebuilding must never transform **forgiveness into an obligation.**

Mbebe (2025), for example, argues that the TRC sometimes instrumentalised Ubuntu in ways that placed moral pressure upon apartheid victims to forgive perpetrators for the sake of national reconciliation.

This produces an important victimological principle: **Victims may be invited into reconciliation, but they should not be required to forgive in order to make society comfortable with its past.**

Rwanda and Gacaca

Rwanda provides another important example.

Following the 1994 genocide, the conventional court system faced an enormous number of cases. Rwanda developed modernised **Gacaca courts**, drawing partly upon traditional community-based dispute resolution while incorporating elements of state criminal justice. Gacaca attempted simultaneously to establish truth, prosecute perpetrators, involve communities and contribute to reconciliation.

Research suggests mixed outcomes. Wielenga and Harris (2011) concluded that Gacaca contributed positively to justice and reconciliation and thereby to peace and security, although the system became more retributive than traditional restorative Gacaca. Experimental and psychosocial research also found some evidence that participation influenced intergroup perceptions and social integration (Rimé et al., 2011).

Yet victimological analysis reveals the other side. Brounéus (2008) found that some female survivors who testified experienced threats, insecurity, isolation and retraumatisation. Other research has identified concerns about fairness, survivor marginalisation, due process and the possibility that Gacaca intensified divisions in some communities (Burnet, 2008; Bornkamm, 2012).

Gacaca therefore demonstrates a crucial lesson: **community-based justice is not automatically restorative, and truth-telling is not automatically therapeutic**. A culturally embedded institution can promote peace only when victims' safety, dignity, agency and procedural rights are protected.

JAN J. M. VAN DIJK: FROM VICTIMHOOD TO VICTIM AGENCY AS A FOUNDATION FOR PEACE

An important theoretical connection between victimology and peacebuilding can be derived from the work of the Dutch victimologist Jan J. M. van Dijk. Van Dijk, recipient of the Stockholm Prize in Criminology, has played a major role in establishing victimisation as an independent subject of international criminological research (Van Dijk, 2009; Van Dijk et al., 2007). His work is particularly relevant to peacebuilding because it challenges conceptions of victims as passive recipients of protection and assistance and instead draws attention to recognition, rights, participation and agency. Although Van Dijk does not formulate a comprehensive theory of peace, several elements of his victimological work provide an important foundation for understanding how victimology can contribute to peaceful societies.

Making Victims Visible

A first contribution concerns the visibility of victims. Traditional criminology and criminal justice concentrated predominantly on offenders, offences, punishment and crime control. Victimology shifted part of this attention towards those who experienced the consequences of crime and violence.

Van Dijk's work on international victimisation surveys was particularly important in this respect. Official police statistics reveal only those crimes that become known to

criminal justice institutions. Victim surveys make it possible to identify victimisation that remains outside official statistics, including crimes that victims do not report (Van Dijk et al., 2007).

This has a wider significance for peacebuilding. Political violence, armed conflict, authoritarian repression and structural injustice can produce large populations of victims whose experiences remain absent from official accounts. Governments and institutions may deny, minimise or selectively document victimisation. Victimological research can therefore contribute to peace by making previously invisible experiences visible. The first contribution of victimology to peace can consequently be expressed as:

Victimisation → documentation → visibility → recognition

Recognition is important because sustainable peace requires more than stopping violence. People who have suffered serious injustice may also require public acknowledgement that the harm occurred and that their experiences matter.

Van Dijk's Critique of the Western Conception of Victimhood

Van Dijk's article *Free the Victim: A Critique of the Western Conception of Victimhood* (2009) is particularly relevant to the distinction between Western and non-Western approaches to peace.

Van Dijk examines the historical and cultural meanings attached to the Western concept of the victim. He argues that Western representations of victimhood have been strongly influenced by religious and cultural traditions connecting victimhood with sacrifice, suffering, innocence, passivity and forgiveness. This creates a potentially problematic social expectation. The socially acceptable or 'ideal' victim may be imagined as someone who has suffered innocently, accepts assistance and eventually forgives. Such expectations become particularly significant in post-conflict reconciliation. Victims who remain angry, demand accountability, seek reparations, become politically active or refuse to forgive may be perceived as obstacles to reconciliation. Yet from a victimological perspective, anger and demands for justice do not necessarily represent barriers to peace. They may constitute legitimate responses to serious injustice.

Van Dijk's critique therefore provides an important warning for peacebuilding: **peace should not require victims to perform victimhood in ways that make reconciliation easier for society**. This principle is particularly relevant to truth and reconciliation processes in which victims may experience explicit or implicit pressure to forgive perpetrators for the sake of national unity.

From Passive Victimhood to Victim Agency

Van Dijk's work helps support a transition from the conception of victims as passive recipients of assistance towards recognition of **victim agency**.

The conventional model can be represented as:

Victim → suffering → professional assistance → recovery

A peace-oriented victimological model is broader:

Victimisation → recognition → voice → participation → justice → restoration → agency → social change

Victims are therefore not simply people to whom something has happened. They can also become witnesses, advocates, researchers, campaigners, organisers and peacebuilders.

This distinction is important because peacebuilding programmes are sometimes designed by governments, international organisations and professionals and subsequently offered to victims. A victimological approach reverses part of this process by asking victims themselves what justice, recovery, reparation and peace mean.

Victims should therefore not merely be consulted about peacebuilding. Where possible, they should participate in its design, implementation and evaluation.

Van Dijk and Restorative Justice

A second connection concerns restorative justice.

Conventional criminal justice primarily asks:

1. Which law was violated?
2. Who committed the offence?
3. How should the offender be punished?

Victim-centred restorative justice introduces different questions:

1. Who was harmed?
2. What harm was experienced?
3. What does the victim need?
4. Who has responsibility for repairing the harm?
5. Can damaged relationships be restored?

Van Dijk and Wemmers (2014) place victims' services and rights within a broader international justice framework. Such an approach is important to peacebuilding because societies emerging from conflict must address both accountability for wrongdoing and the consequences experienced by victims. Justice cannot therefore be reduced to punishment.

Victims may seek criminal accountability, but they may simultaneously require acknowledgement, information, restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, apology, memorialisation or institutional reform. A comprehensive victimological model of justice therefore contains several dimensions:

Six Dimensions of Justice		
A victimological framework for accountability, repair and social transformation		
FORM OF JUSTICE	PRIMARY PURPOSE	CENTRAL QUESTION
1 Retributive justice	Holding perpetrators accountable	Who is responsible, and what proportionate sanction is required?
2 Restorative justice	Repairing harm and, where appropriate, relationships	Who was harmed, what do they need, and who should help repair the harm?
3 Reparative justice	Compensating victims and providing other forms of redress	What should victims receive to address the consequences of harm?
4 Procedural justice	Ensuring fair, respectful and transparent treatment	Were victims heard, informed and treated with dignity throughout the process?
5 Transitional justice	Addressing widespread historical or political violence during societal transitions	How should a society confront large-scale abuses while rebuilding peace and trust?
6 Transformative justice	Changing structures and institutions that contributed to victimisation	Which underlying conditions must change to prevent renewed victimisation?

Figure 2: Six Dimensions of Justice

The last dimension is especially important for peace.

If victims receive compensation but the political, economic or institutional structures responsible for their victimisation remain unchanged, future victimisation may remain possible.

Van Dijk, Galtung and Positive Peace

Van Dijk's victimological perspective can be strengthened by connecting it to Johan Galtung's distinction between negative and positive peace.

Galtung (1969) argued that peace should not simply be understood as the absence of direct violence. He distinguished between **negative peace**, referring broadly to the absence of direct violence, and **positive peace**, which requires attention to the social conditions and structures that generate preventable suffering and inequality.

Victimology complements this distinction particularly well.

Negative peace asks: **Has the violence stopped?**

Victimology asks: **What happened to the people who experienced the violence?**

Positive peace asks: **Have the conditions that produced the violence and injustice changed?**

Combining these perspectives produces a more comprehensive sequence: Ending violence → recognising victims → establishing truth → providing justice → repairing harm → restoring dignity → changing harmful structures → preventing revictimization → positive peace.

This provides a powerful theoretical bridge between victimology and peace studies.

The prevention of revictimization can consequently be understood as one of victimology's distinctive contributions to positive peace.

Connecting Van Dijk with Ubuntu

Van Dijk's perspective also provides an interesting point of comparison with non-Western traditions of justice and reconciliation. African philosophies associated with Ubuntu emphasise relational personhood and interconnectedness. Harm to an individual is consequently not understood exclusively as an injury to an autonomous person; it can also damage relationships within families and communities. From such a perspective, justice may require restoration of social relationships rather than punishment alone.

This produces an important potential complementarity:

- Van Dijk → recognition, rights and agency of victims
- Ubuntu → relationships, community and restoration

Combined, these traditions suggest that sustainable peace requires both individual dignity and relational restoration. However, Van Dijk's critique of passive victimhood introduces an essential safeguard. Community harmony cannot take precedence automatically over victims' rights.

A reconciliation process becomes problematic when victims are expected to sacrifice their demands for justice in order to restore social harmony. Forgiveness may contribute profoundly to personal or communal reconciliation when freely chosen, but compulsory forgiveness can reproduce victimisation. The resulting principle is: Reconciliation should be available to victims, but should never become an obligation imposed upon them.

From Western and Non-Western Victimology towards a Global Victimology of Peace

The comparison also demonstrates why a simple opposition between Western and non-Western victimology is inadequate. Western victimological traditions have contributed significantly to individual rights, victim surveys, compensation, procedural justice, trauma-informed services, criminal accountability and restorative justice.

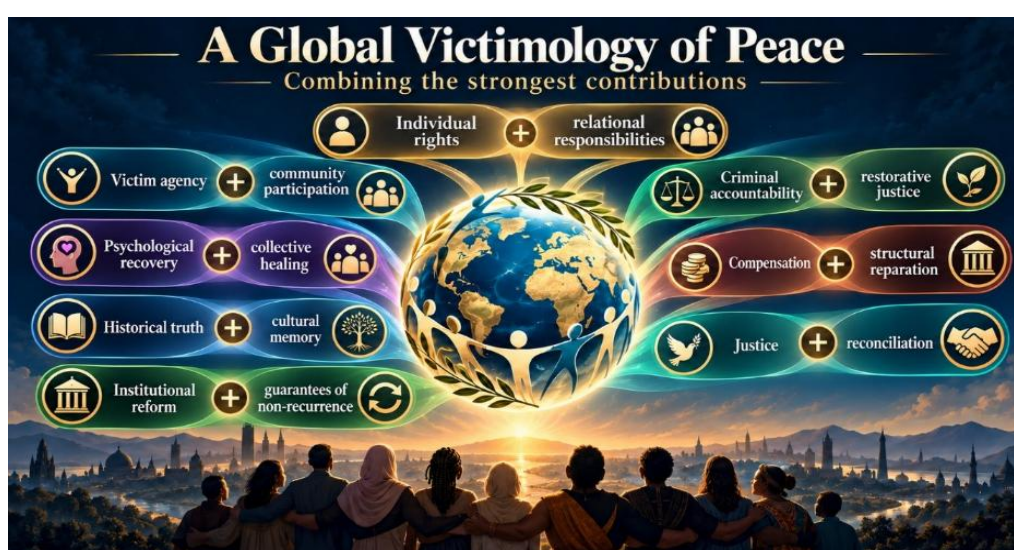


Figure 3: A Global Victimology of Peace (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6aab8bd6-31d0-83eb-99c4-22b0917fb536>)

African, Indigenous, Asian and other non-Western traditions can broaden this perspective by drawing attention to relationships, extended families, communities, collective memory, spirituality, land, historical injustice and collective restoration. The objective should therefore not be to determine whether Western or non-Western approaches are superior.

Such integration also requires recognising the considerable diversity within both Western and non-Western societies. Neither category represents a single intellectual tradition.

Victimology and the Prevention of Cycles of Violence

Van Dijk's work can finally be connected to one of the central concerns of peace studies: preventing renewed violence.

Unresolved victimisation may become part of collective narratives of humiliation and injustice. Political movements can subsequently mobilise these experiences to legitimise hostility or retaliation. A potential cycle can be represented as:



Figure 4: Victimology and the Prevention Cycle of Violence (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6aab8bd6-31d0-83eb-99c4-22b0917fb536>)

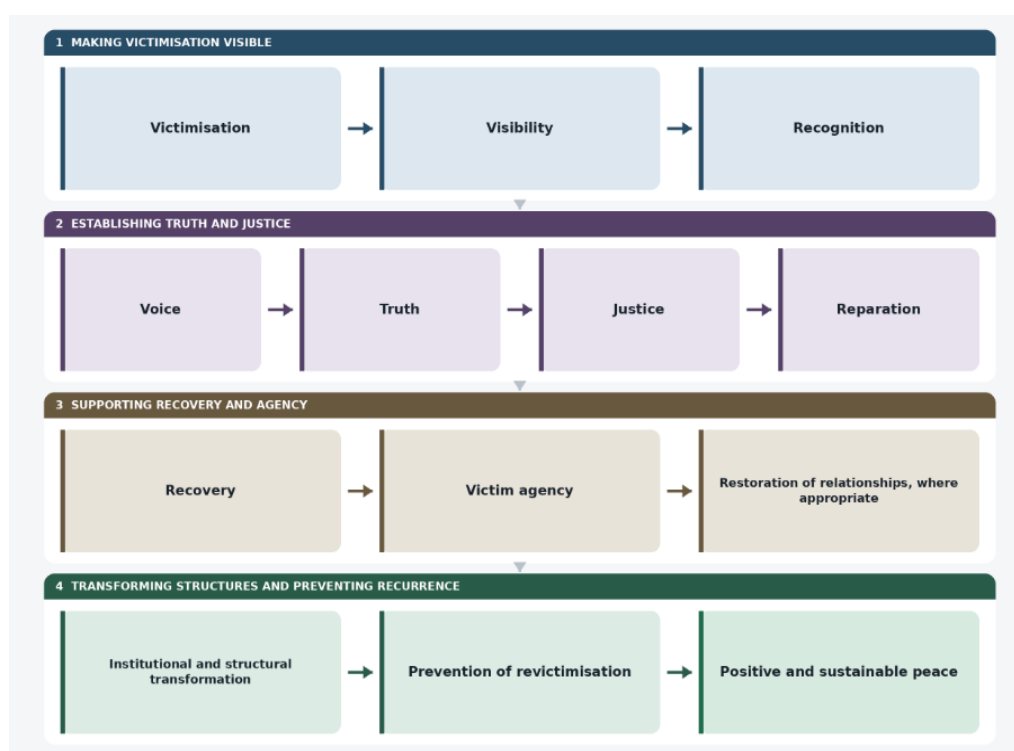
Victimology can intervene at several stages. Recognition challenges denial. Truth-seeking establishes historical knowledge. Justice challenges impunity. Reparations address losses. Psychological and community interventions can support recovery. Institutional reform addresses conditions that permitted victimisation. Dialogue and restorative processes may rebuild damaged relationships where victims wish to participate.

Importantly, this model does not suggest that victims normally become perpetrators. Most victims do not respond to victimisation with violence. Rather, unresolved victimisation can be politically mobilised and transformed into narratives legitimising future violence.

Preventing such processes is therefore an important meeting point between victimology and peacebuilding.

A Van Dijk-Inspired Model of Victimological Peacebuilding

The relationship between victimology and sustainable peace can be understood as a process through which victimisation is made visible, acknowledged and addressed, while the social and institutional conditions that enabled the harm are transformed. This perspective extends victimology beyond the study of individual suffering and victim assistance. It connects the recognition and recovery of victims with justice, institutional reform and the prevention of renewed violence.



From invisibility to recognition

Victimisation does not automatically produce social or legal recognition. Many experiences remain unreported, unrecorded or institutionally denied. The first task of peace-oriented victimology is therefore to make harm visible. Victimisation surveys, personal testimony, truth-seeking procedures and accessible reporting mechanisms can uncover experiences that otherwise remain hidden.

Visibility must be followed by recognition. Recognition means more than establishing that an incident occurred. It requires acknowledgement of the victim's suffering, dignity, rights and social position. Van Dijk and Wemmers (2010) observe that victims were historically treated as the forgotten party within criminal justice. The development of victimology and victims' rights sought to correct this exclusion by providing victims with services, procedural rights and opportunities to participate.

Van Dijk (2009) nevertheless warns that recognition should not imprison people within a passive and stigmatising victim identity. Victims should not be represented solely as helpless, damaged or dependent. They must also be recognised as rights-holders, participants and agents capable of influencing decisions concerning justice, recovery and social change.

Voice, truth and justice

Recognition creates the conditions for voice. Voice means that victims can describe what happened, explain its consequences and participate meaningfully in the processes that affect them. Their participation should be voluntary, informed, safe and free from pressure to forgive or reconcile. Giving victims a voice contributes to truth. Truth includes factual clarification of events, public acknowledgement of wrongdoing and examination of the social, political and institutional conditions that enabled victimisation. It can challenge denial, expose patterns of abuse and restore the public record.

Truth, however, cannot substitute for justice. Depending on the nature of the harm, justice may include criminal accountability, procedural fairness, restorative processes, civil remedies, public acknowledgement or institutional action. Van Dijk's victim-centred approach to restorative justice emphasises that restorative practices must respect victims' interests and rights rather than using victims primarily as instruments for offender rehabilitation or social harmony (Van Dijk, 2013).

Reparation, recovery and agency

Justice should be connected to reparation. Reparation may include restitution, financial compensation, rehabilitation, acknowledgement, memorialisation and guarantees that violations will not recur. International principles recognise these different forms of reparation and connect individual remedies with wider preventive and institutional measures (United Nations General Assembly, 2005).

Reparation can support recovery, but recovery should not be understood as restoring victims to an imagined condition in which the harm never occurred. It may involve rebuilding safety, social trust, health, identity, relationships and control over one's life. Recovery becomes sustainable when victims regain agency: the capacity to make decisions, define their own needs and participate in shaping responses to victimisation.

Restorative justice can contribute by directing attention towards harm, responsibility, needs and damaged relationships rather than punishment alone (Zehr, 2015). Restoration of relationships should never be treated as an automatic objective, however. Contact, dialogue, forgiveness and reconciliation are appropriate only when they are safe, voluntary and desired by the victim.

From individual redress to structural transformation

Peace-oriented victimology must look beyond individual cases. Victimization frequently develops within institutional and structural conditions such as discrimination, inequality, exclusion, corruption, impunity or failures of protection. If these conditions remain unchanged, assistance to individual victims may relieve suffering without preventing new victimization.

Transformative justice therefore asks how unequal power relationships and exclusionary structures can be changed, while strengthening local participation and agency (Gready & Robins, 2014). Transitional-justice approaches similarly combine truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence. These guarantees may require legal reform, institutional oversight, education, professional training and reform of security, judicial or public-service institutions.

The model consequently moves from individual harm towards collective and institutional responsibility. Its final aim is not merely to respond more effectively after victimization, but to reduce the likelihood that similar harms will happen again.

A New Question for Victimology

Traditional criminology has primarily asked:

- What should society do about offenders?

Traditional victim services have primarily asked:

- What assistance does the victim require?

Peace-oriented victimology adds a third question:

- What must society change so that this victimization does not happen again?

This third question links Van Dijk's emphasis on victims' recognition, rights, participation and agency with Galtung's concept of positive peace. For Galtung (1969), peace is not simply the absence of direct violence. Positive peace also requires social justice and the transformation of structures that systematically restrict people's opportunities and wellbeing. A victimological approach to peacebuilding therefore connects individual rights with collective responsibility; accountability with restoration; psychological recovery with social healing; and reparation with structural transformation. Sustainable peace becomes possible when victims are not only assisted after harm, but are heard, recognised and enabled to influence the institutions and social arrangements that shape their lives. The model should not be interpreted as a rigid or universally linear sequence. Recognition, justice, recovery and institutional reform can overlap, occur in different orders and sometimes conflict. Its central proposition is nevertheless clear: responding to victimization becomes peacebuilding when recognition and reparation are combined with victim agency, structural change and effective prevention of renewed harm.

CONCLUSION

Jan J. M. van Dijk does not present a formal theory of victimology and peace. Nevertheless, his work provides an important theoretical foundation for developing one. His contribution

lies particularly in making victims visible, challenging culturally constructed notions of passive victimhood, strengthening victims' rights and encouraging recognition of victims as social actors rather than merely recipients of assistance.

When Van Dijk's victimological perspective is combined with Galtung's distinction between negative and positive peace, restorative and transitional justice, and relational traditions such as Ubuntu, a broader conception of peace emerges.

Peace is then no longer simply: **the absence of violence.**

It becomes: **the presence of recognition, dignity, justice, restoration, agency and social conditions that reduce the likelihood of future victimisation.**

This leads to a broader definition of the role of victimology in peacebuilding:

Victimology promotes peace by identifying and recognising victimisation, restoring the voice and agency of victims, contributing to justice and reparation, repairing individual and collective harm, challenging institutions and structures that produce victimisation, and helping societies prevent revictimization and recurrent cycles of violence.

This approach has implications for both Western and non-Western societies. Western traditions contribute strong frameworks concerning individual rights, empirical victimisation research and institutional accountability, whilst non-Western traditions can broaden victimology through relational, communal, historical and culturally embedded understandings of harm and restoration.

The future development of the field might therefore appropriately be described as a **global victimology of peace**: a victimology concerned not only with what happens to people after violence, but also with how knowledge derived from victims can contribute to preventing violence and constructing more just and peaceful societies.

VICTIMS AS AGENTS OF PEACE RATHER THAN PASSIVE RECIPIENTS

One of the most important contemporary developments is the movement from seeing victims as passive recipients of assistance towards recognising them as **agents**.

Traditional approaches can implicitly construct victims as: **traumatised → vulnerable → dependent → needing professional assistance.**

These conditions may indeed exist, but this representation is incomplete.

Victims can also become: **witnesses → organisers → advocates → researchers → negotiators → educators → peacebuilders.**

Victim organisations have contributed to campaigns concerning missing persons, landmines, enforced disappearances, war crimes, reparations, truth commissions and human rights.

Recent research on transitional justice similarly argues that victim participation should extend beyond consultation: victims and victims' organisations should participate in the development, implementation and evaluation of processes affecting them.

This suggests a shift from **victim-centred peacebuilding** toward **victim-led peacebuilding**.

VICTIMOLOGY CAN HELP PREVENT CYCLES OF REVENGE

Unaddressed victimisation can also contribute to future violence.



Figure 5: Unaddressed victimisation can also contribute to future violence (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6aab8bd6-31d0-83eb-99c4-22b0917fb536>)

Victimology can intervene at several points in this cycle.

Acknowledgement challenges denial. Justice challenges impunity. Reparations address losses. Psychological and community support address trauma. Intergroup dialogue may challenge dehumanisation. Institutional reforms address recurring causes.

This does not mean that victimisation mechanically causes perpetratorship. Most victims do not become violent.

Rather, political actors can mobilise genuine or perceived historical victimisation by constructing narratives of humiliation, revenge and existential threat. Peace-oriented victimology therefore needs to study not only victim suffering but also the politics of victimhood.

McEvoy and McConnachie (2012) warn against simplistic distinctions between completely innocent victims and completely distinct perpetrators. Political conflicts frequently create complicated identities and hierarchies of deserving and undeserving victims.

FROM INDIVIDUAL TRAUMA TO COLLECTIVE AND STRUCTURAL VICTIMISATION

An expanded victimology of peace should therefore operate at multiple levels.



Figure 6: Six levels of Victimisation and Peacebuilding (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6aab8bd6-31d0-83eb-99c4-22b0917fb536>)

Peacebuilding consequently requires interventions at all six levels.

Treating trauma at Level 1 while leaving Levels 4-6 untouched may assist individuals but leave the social machinery of future victimisation intact.

WESTERN AND NON-WESTERN APPROACHES COMPARED

The strongest approach is therefore not to decide whether Western or non-Western victimology is superior, but to identify their complementary contributions.

Western-oriented approaches	Non-Western/relational approaches
Individual rights	Relational responsibility
Legal accountability	Community restoration
Criminal justice	Social reconciliation
Psychological trauma	Collective/community suffering
Compensation	Material and relational reparation
Professional victim services	Family/community participation
Procedural justice	Restoration of social harmony
Individual testimony	Collective memory and storytelling
State institutions	Community and customary institutions
Human-rights framework	Cultural and moral frameworks

These are tendencies rather than absolute differences. Restorative justice, for example, now has substantial institutional support in Western jurisdictions, while criminal justice is obviously central to many non-Western states. Indeed, Rwanda's Gacaca illustrates

precisely this hybridity: it incorporated African dispute-resolution traditions and elements derived from Western-style criminal courts (Bornkamm, 2012).

The future of peace-oriented victimology should therefore be pluralistic rather than geographically binary.

TOWARDS A GLOBAL VICTIMOLOGY OF PEACE

A global victimology of peace could integrate the strongest insights from different intellectual and cultural traditions.



Figure 7: A Global Victimology of Peace (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6aab8bd6-31d0-83eb-99c4-22b0917fb536>)

CONCLUSION

Victimology has a more fundamental role in peacebuilding than its traditional location within criminology and criminal justice might suggest. War, political repression, colonial domination, terrorism, communal conflict and structural injustice do not end when direct violence ceases. They leave psychological injuries, bereavement, material losses, damaged relationships, institutional distrust, contested memories and inequalities that can persist across generations. If these consequences remain unrecognised or inadequately addressed, a ceasefire may establish negative peace while leaving the conditions for renewed victimisation intact. A victimological perspective therefore evaluates peace not only by whether violence has stopped, but also by what happens to those who have suffered and by whether the institutions and structures that enabled their victimisation have changed.

The analysis developed in this article demonstrates that victimology contributes to peace through a connected set of processes: making victimisation visible; acknowledging victims and their rights; protecting their safety; establishing truth and historical memory;

pursuing accountability; providing reparation; supporting psychological, familial and community recovery; restoring victim agency; repairing relationships where this is safe and desired; reforming institutions; and creating credible guarantees of non-recurrence. These processes should not be understood as a fixed or universally applicable sequence. They can overlap, develop unevenly and produce tensions between justice, recovery, reconciliation and political stability. Their value lies in showing that sustainable peace requires more than one intervention and cannot be reduced to either criminal punishment or psychosocial assistance.

The comparison between Western and non-Western approaches reinforces this conclusion. Western victimology has made indispensable contributions through empirical victimisation research, individual rights, trauma-informed practice, procedural justice, compensation, criminal accountability and international human-rights standards. Relational, Indigenous and non-Western traditions broaden this perspective by drawing attention to collective suffering, family and community responsibilities, spirituality, land, cultural memory, historical injustice and the restoration of social relationships. These traditions should not be treated as internally uniform or placed in a rigid geographical opposition. The most productive direction is a pluralistic and critical synthesis that protects universal rights while recognising that experiences of harm, justice and recovery are culturally and historically situated.

The experiences of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Rwanda's Gacaca courts illustrate both the potential and the risks of such synthesis. Truth-telling, public acknowledgement and community participation can challenge denial and contribute to national reconstruction. Yet testimony can also expose victims to insecurity and retraumatisation; culturally embedded institutions can reproduce inequalities; and reconciliation can become coercive when victims are expected to forgive for the sake of political unity. These cases demonstrate that no process is genuinely victim-centred merely because it invites victims to speak. Victim participation must be informed, voluntary, safe and capable of influencing decisions. Reconciliation is ethically defensible only where it does not replace accountability or subordinate victims' rights to an externally imposed vision of social harmony.

Van Dijk's work provides an important foundation for this broader conception of peace-oriented victimology. His research helped make hidden victimisation visible, while his critique of passive and culturally constructed victimhood cautions against defining people permanently through suffering (Van Dijk, 2009). Victims should be recognised not only as recipients of care, compensation or protection, but also as rights-holders, knowledge-holders and social actors. This shift from victimhood to victim agency is essential to peacebuilding. Victims and their organisations can contribute to truth-seeking, reparations, institutional reform, public education, historical memory and the identification of risks of renewed violence. Their participation should consequently extend beyond consultation towards meaningful involvement in the design, implementation and evaluation of peace and justice processes.

A peace-oriented victimology must also operate at multiple and interacting levels. Individual trauma is connected to family disruption, damaged communities, intergroup fear, discriminatory institutions and historical structures such as colonialism, slavery, dispossession and socioeconomic exclusion. Treatment at the individual level may provide necessary relief, but it cannot by itself dismantle the social machinery through

which victimisation is reproduced. Sustainable prevention therefore requires interventions that connect psychological recovery with community reconstruction, institutional accountability and structural transformation.

This multilevel perspective also clarifies the relationship between victimology and the prevention of recurring violence. Victimisation does not mechanically convert victims into perpetrators, and most victims do not respond to suffering with violence. Nevertheless, unresolved and politically mobilised experiences of humiliation, injustice and historical victimhood can contribute to enemy narratives, dehumanisation and demands for revenge. Victimology can interrupt this process through recognition, protection, justice, reparation, dialogue, accurate historical memory and institutional reform. It must therefore examine not only victim suffering, but also the political uses of victimhood and the creation of hierarchies between victims considered deserving and those whose suffering is denied. The central question of peace-oriented victimology consequently extends beyond what should happen to offenders and what assistance victims require. It asks:

What must change in society so that people do not become victims of this violence again?

This question links victimology directly to Galtung's concept of positive peace, restorative and transitional justice, and transformative approaches that address unequal and exclusionary structures (Galtung, 1969; Gready & Robins, 2014). It does not replace accountability or victim assistance. Rather, it connects them to a wider preventive project.

The future of the field may therefore be understood as a **global victimology of peace**: an empirically grounded, culturally pluralistic and victim-informed discipline concerned with recognition, rights, recovery, agency, justice and non-recurrence. Its ultimate contribution is to demonstrate that peace must be assessed from the perspective of those who have experienced violence. From that perspective, peace is not simply the absence of war. It is the presence of safety, dignity, truth, justice, reparation, participation and social conditions that reduce the likelihood of future victimisation. Victimology can thus develop from a science concerned principally with the consequences of victimisation into a science that also contributes to preventing violence and constructing more just and peaceful societies.

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