

From the Social Construction of Deviance to the Dynamics of Responsibility: Labelling, Victimology, and Restorative Justice in the Reconfiguration of Social Control in Italy

Valentina Moncada*

* ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8211-2596>

Department of Human and Social Sciences, University of Enna “Kore” – Sicily, Italy

DOI: 10.29322/IJSRP.16.07.2026.p17510

<https://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.16.07.2026.p17510>

Paper Received Date: 16th June 2026

Paper Acceptance Date: 19th July 2026

Paper Publication Date: 25th July 2026

Abstract- This article introduces the concept of the 'relational construction of responsibility' as a theoretical framework through which to understand the reconfiguration of social control in the late modern era. Contemporary criminology has undergone a profound shift from offender-centred approaches to relational and victim-centred paradigms of justice. Against this backdrop, the article investigates whether the growing importance of victims and the spread of restorative justice signifies the replacement of the social construction processes described by labelling theory, or whether these processes are being reconfigured within new forms of social control. Taking an integrative review approach, the article brings together four areas of scholarship: labelling theory, critical victimology, restorative justice and desistance studies. Drawing on interactionist sociology, recognition theory and relational justice, the article argues that contemporary systems increasingly construct responsibility through practices of mutual recognition, relational accountability and social participation. The article defines the 'relational construction of responsibility' as the social process through which responsibility for crime is co-produced and negotiated among offenders, victims, and communities. From this perspective, social construction processes have not disappeared, but have shifted from producing deviant identities to co-producing responsible ones. By integrating the contributions of Becker, Honneth and Llewellyn, the article proposes a framework to explain contemporary transformations in social control. The analysis concludes that restorative justice should be understood as a potential reconfiguration of social responses, capable of maintaining normative accountability while minimising the risk of permanent stigmatisation and social exclusion.

Index Terms- *Labelling theory; restorative justice; critical victimology; recognition theory; relational responsibility; desistance; social control.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the last four decades, criminological scholarship has undergone a profound theoretical and normative transformation. The traditional offender-centred paradigm, which was largely focused on punishment and rehabilitation and the characteristics of offenders as individuals, has progressively given way to more relational and victim-oriented approaches (Garland, 2001; Walklate, 2007; Zehr, 2015). The growing prominence of victims' rights, the spread of restorative justice practices and the increasing interest in reintegration and desistance processes have significantly changed how crime, responsibility and social control are understood (Braithwaite, 1989; Maruna, 2001; Daly, 2022).

This transformation is deeply embedded in the broader socio-legal changes of late modern societies. The crisis of penal welfarism, the expansion of risk-oriented governance and increasing dissatisfaction with purely retributive responses have all contributed to the reconfiguration of contemporary criminal justice (Garland, 2001; Pratt, 2007; Simon, 2007). As numerous scholars have argued, criminal justice is increasingly operating within a context characterised by heightened social insecurity and demands for direct participation (Garland, 2001; Rose, 1999; Simon, 2007). Concurrently, victimological scholarship has challenged the long-standing marginalisation of victims within criminal proceedings (Walklate, 2007; Duggan, 2018). Building on the pioneering work of Christie (1977, 1986), victims have emerged as pivotal figures, demanding recognition and effective forms of redress (Walklate, 2011; Pemberton, 2015). Similarly, restorative justice has offered alternative perspectives on crime, shifting the focus from legal rule-breaking to the disruption of

social relationships and the resolution of harm (Zehr, 2015; Braithwaite, 2002; Daly, 2022).

Despite these developments, a fundamental theoretical question remains: To what extent do these transformations represent a genuine departure from the social construction processes described by labelling theory? Classical labelling theory demonstrated that deviance is not an intrinsic quality of behaviour, but rather the result of social processes of definition and reaction (Becker, 1963; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Through mechanisms of stigma and social classification, individuals may internalise deviant identities, which can lead to exclusion and reinforce criminal trajectories (Lemert, 1951; Goffman, 1963). The present article argues that the social construction processes described by labelling theory have not disappeared. Instead, they have been reconfigured within new forms of social control that construct responsibility through relational and participatory mechanisms (Garland, 2001; O'Malley, 2004). To account for this, the article introduces the concept of the relational construction of responsibility, which is defined as the social process through which responsibility for crime is co-produced and negotiated among offenders, victims and communities through practices of recognition and accountability. In developing this argument, the article synthesises four areas of scholarship: labelling theory, critical victimology, restorative justice and desistance studies. By engaging with recognition theory (Honneth, 1995) and relational justice (Llewellyn, 2011), the article aims to provide a broader sociological understanding of how contemporary systems construct identities of responsibility rather than merely producing identities of deviance.

Accordingly, the research addresses the following question: To what extent do victim-centred and restorative approaches represent a transformation rather than a replacement of labelling processes, and how can the concept of the relational construction of responsibility help to explain this shift?

Methodologically, the article takes an integrative theoretical review approach to develop a conceptual framework through an interdisciplinary synthesis. It proceeds as follows: the first section revisits Becker's labelling processes; the second examines contemporary transformations in social control; the third explores the social construction of victimhood; the fourth discusses restorative justice as a space of symbolic negotiation; the fifth develops the concept of the relational construction of responsibility. Finally, the article reflects on the implications for desistance and the broader reconfiguration of social control.

II. BECKER AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL DENSITY OF LABELLING

Howard S. Becker's work has had a profound impact on the sociological understanding of deviance, challenging its presumed ontological status and redefining it as a social construction (Becker, 1963). According to this perspective, deviance is not an inherent characteristic of behaviour, but rather the result of interactive processes through which social groups define,

negotiate, and formalise the boundaries between normality and transgression (Becker, 1963; Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

As Becker famously argued, social groups create deviance by establishing rules that, if broken, constitute deviance, and by applying these rules to particular individuals and labelling them as outsiders (Becker, 1963). The analytical significance of this perspective lies in its displacement of criminological attention from the act of deviance itself to the processes of social reaction that confer meaning upon conduct (Kitsuse, 1962).

This interactionist shift represented a significant epistemological shift in criminology. Instead of asking why individuals commit deviant acts, labelling theory asks how certain behaviours and individuals are defined as deviant (Erikson, 1962). The focus of analysis shifts from deviance itself to the social production of deviance.

A crucial element in this process is the formation of what Becker (1963), building upon the work of Edwin Lemert (1951), conceptualised as the 'deviant career'. Through repeated experiences of social reaction, individuals may progressively internalise the deviant label until it becomes a 'master status'; the dominant interpretative framework through which the self and others understand identity (Hughes, 1945; Becker, 1963).

At this stage, stigma ceases to operate merely as an external classification device and becomes an internalised principle of self-organisation (Goffman, 1963). It structures biographical trajectories, restricts opportunities for social participation, and reduces the reversibility of social identities (Link & Phelan, 2001). Thus, labelling processes are not merely symbolic acts, but materially consequential mechanisms of social stratification and exclusion (Phelan et al., 2008).

The sociological strength of Becker's theory lies in its ability to reveal the relational nature of deviance. Deviance is not produced in isolation, but through interactions that are embedded in asymmetrical power relations (Becker, 1963; Schur, 1971). The application of norms is selective, contingent, and unevenly distributed. Not all rule-breaking is equally visible, nor are all subjects equally vulnerable to labelling processes (Becker, 1963). This insight remains central to contemporary criminology. In late modern societies, social control increasingly extends beyond punishing completed acts to managing risk, anticipation and prevention (Feeley & Simon, 1992; Garland, 2001). As categories of suspicion and dangerousness become institutionalised, processes of classification increasingly precede formal deviance itself (Harcourt, 2007). Individuals may be socially marked not only for what they have done, but also for what they are perceived as likely to do (Rose, 2000).

However, this transformation raises an important theoretical question. If classical labelling theory explains how societies produce deviant identities through stigma and exclusion, can contemporary relational and restorative practices also be understood as mechanisms through which societies construct responsible identities?

This question does not imply the abandonment of Becker's insights. On the contrary, it suggests their extension. If deviance is socially constructed through interaction, then responsibility may also be constructed through processes of recognition, accountability, and reintegration (Braithwaite, 1989; Maruna, 2001). From this perspective, Becker's legacy is not only a theory of exclusion, but also the necessary starting point for

understanding the relational reconstruction of social membership (Llewellyn, 2011; Honneth, 1995).

III. SOCIAL CONTROL, RISK GOVERNANCE AND PUNITIVE TECHNOLOGIES

If labelling theory reveals that deviance is the product of social definition, the broader concept of social control allows us to understand the structural conditions within which these processes take shape. In classical sociological thought, social control refers to the set of formal and informal mechanisms through which societies regulate conduct, preserve normative order, and reproduce social cohesion (Ross, 1901; Parsons, 1951). Émile Durkheim was among the first to observe that reactions to crime perform not only repressive, but also integrative functions, reinforcing the symbolic boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable conduct (Durkheim, 1893). From this perspective, punishment is not simply a legal response, but a social practice through which collective morality is reproduced and reaffirmed (Durkheim, 1895). Critical criminology progressively radicalised this insight. Michel Foucault demonstrated how modern punitive power evolved from sovereign spectacle to disciplinary governance, operating through surveillance, normalisation, and the production of compliant subjectivities (Foucault, 1975). Punishment, in this framework, does not merely sanction behaviour, but actively shapes identities and social categories through the 'micro-physics of power' (Foucault, 1975).

Becker's contribution can be situated within this genealogy. His analysis of labelling revealed the selective nature of social control, showing that not all deviant acts are equally sanctioned, and not all individuals are equally exposed to processes of classification (Becker, 1963). This selectivity reflects broader relations of power, visibility, and institutional legitimacy (Schur, 1971). In late modernity, however, social control has undergone further transformation. David Garland (2001) describes this shift as the emergence of a 'culture of control', characterised by heightened insecurity, preventive logic and the increasing centrality of risk management. Similarly, Jonathan Simon (2007) argues that crime has become a generalised framework for "governing through crime," extending penal rationalities far beyond the boundaries of criminal law and into the management of everyday social life. This transformation marks a significant displacement: from the punishment of completed acts toward the anticipation of future risks (Feeley & Simon, 1992). Control increasingly operates through prediction, categorisation, and preventive intervention (Harcourt, 2007). Individuals are assessed and managed not only on the basis of what they have done, but on the statistical probability of what they may do (Rose, 2000). This anticipatory logic intensifies the classificatory mechanisms already identified by Becker. Social categorisation no longer follows deviance; it increasingly precedes it. Processes of suspicion, danger and vulnerability become embedded in institutional and technological systems of governance (Aas, 2011). The digitalisation of social life has further amplified this tendency. As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) argues, contemporary societies are increasingly organised around systems of continuous traceability and behavioural extraction. In this context, social control extends into digital infrastructures, where reputational visibility and algorithmic classification create new

forms of enduring stigma (Lageson, 2020). For individuals involved in criminal justice systems, the permanence of digital traces significantly complicates reintegration (Maruna, 2001). The possibility of 'social forgetting' is reduced, while the right to reconstruct one's identity becomes increasingly fragile (Lageson, 2020). This is particularly relevant for young offenders, whose deviant labels may persist indefinitely through online memory and digital archives. Within this landscape, the growing centrality of victims and the rise of restorative justice can be interpreted as part of a broader reconfiguration of social control (Crawford, 2002). These developments do not necessarily weaken control; rather, they transform its modalities. Social regulation increasingly operates not only through punishment and exclusion, but also through recognition, participation, and relational accountability (Braithwaite, 2002). Yet this transformation remains deeply ambivalent. As Stanley Cohen (1985) warned, innovations designed to humanise penal systems may also lead to 'net-widening,' expanding the reach of social control into previously unregulated spheres of life. Restorative and participatory practices may therefore function both as spaces of reintegration and as subtle extensions of regulatory power (Levant & Daly, 2022). It is within this tension between exclusion and recognition, punishment and participation, that the concept of relational construction of responsibility becomes analytically necessary. Contemporary social control increasingly seeks not only to classify deviance, but to produce accountable subjects through relational mechanisms of recognition and reintegration (Honneth, 1995; Llewellyn, 2011).

IV. VICTIMHOOD AND MORAL RECOGNITION

The rise of victimology represents one of the most significant epistemological shifts in contemporary criminology. For much of the twentieth century, criminal justice systems largely marginalised victims, reducing them to secondary procedural actors or mere sources of evidence (Rock, 2002; Walklate, 2007). Since the 1970s, however, this position has progressively changed. Victims have increasingly emerged as subjects of rights, recognition, and participation, reshaping both the normative and symbolic architecture of criminal justice (Elias, 1986; Dignan, 2005). This transformation marks more than a legal development; it reflects a broader sociological redefinition of crime itself. Crime is no longer understood solely as a violation of abstract legal norms, but as an event that produces concrete harm, suffering, and relational disruption (Zehr, 1990; Pemberton, 2015). In this sense, victimology has shifted criminological attention from the offender alone towards the social consequences of wrongdoing (Walklate, 2011).

Yet, just as deviance is socially constructed within interactionist sociology, victimhood cannot be understood as a purely objective condition. Victimhood itself is the product of social processes of recognition, classification, and moral attribution (Holstein & Miller, 1990; Miers, 1989).

Nils Christie's influential concept of the 'ideal victim' remains central to understanding this process. Christie (1986) demonstrated that public recognition of victimhood is unevenly distributed, and depends upon socially shared expectations of innocence, weakness, and moral respectability. Some forms of suffering are more easily recognised as legitimate, while others

remain invisible, contested, or morally downgraded (Christie, 1986; Strobl, 2004).

This selective distribution of victim recognition reveals that victimhood, like deviance, is structured by relations of power. As Sandra Walklate (2007) argues, the contemporary victim is shaped by a dual process: political emancipation and symbolic incorporation into broader systems of regulation. Recognition of suffering is never neutral; it reflects institutional priorities, cultural representations, and social hierarchies (Walklate, 2011; Duggan, 2018).

This insight has been further developed by Jo Goodey (2005), who shows how victim recognition is deeply influenced by gender, class, ethnicity and social position. Certain forms of suffering become publicly visible because they align with dominant moral narratives, while others—particularly those associated with structural violence, poverty, or social marginality—remain less recognisable (Goodey, 2005; Mawby & Walklate, 1994). From this perspective, victimisation may be interpreted as a form of inverse labelling. Whereas classical labelling theory concerns the social attribution of deviance, victimological processes involve the social attribution of vulnerability and legitimate suffering (Mills, 1989). In both cases, what matters is not simply the event itself, but the collective processes through which it is interpreted, named, and socially validated (Holstein & Miller, 1990).

This theoretical parallel is crucial for the present argument. If Becker (1963) demonstrated that deviance depends upon social reaction, critical victimology demonstrates that harm itself becomes socially meaningful only through analogous processes of recognition. Both deviance and victimhood are therefore relationally constituted categories.

V. RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AS SYMBOLIC NEGOTIATION

The emergence of restorative justice (RJ) represents one of the most significant responses to the crisis of retributive criminal justice. As contemporary penal systems increasingly confront the limits of incarceration, exclusion, and purely punitive responses, restorative justice has gained prominence as an alternative framework for addressing harm, responsibility, and social conflict (Zehr, 1990; Johnstone, 2011). Unlike retributive models, which conceptualise crime primarily as a violation of legal norms and state authority, restorative justice redefines crime as a rupture of social relationships (Braithwaite, 1989). As Howard Zehr (1990, 2015) argues, crime is fundamentally an injury to persons and communities, and justice must therefore focus on repairing harm rather than merely inflicting punishment. This shift entails a profound transformation in the meaning of responsibility. In punitive systems, responsibility is largely formalised as legal blame and institutional sanction. In restorative frameworks, by contrast, responsibility becomes relational: it emerges through dialogue, acknowledgement of harm, and participation in processes of repair (Llewellyn, 2011; Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007). From a sociological perspective, restorative justice can be interpreted as a mechanism of symbolic renegotiation. Whereas traditional criminal proceedings often function as what Harold Garfinkel (1956) described as 'status degradation ceremonies,' restorative encounters create spaces for

However, the growing centrality of victims within contemporary justice systems produces important ambivalences. On the one hand, as Antony Pemberton (2015) argues, victim-centred justice has corrected the abstraction of modern criminal law by restoring concrete suffering to the centre of penal response. On the other hand, the symbolic mobilisation of victimhood may also intensify punitive demands and contribute to forms of penal populism (Pratt, 2007; Garland, 2001).

Victim suffering can become a powerful moral resource for legitimising harsher forms of punishment, reinforcing exclusionary logics rather than opening spaces for social repair (Elias, 1993; McEvoy & Mika, 2002). In this sense, the recognition of victims may function both as an emancipatory mechanism and as a technology of social control.

This tension becomes particularly important when placed in relation to restorative justice. Restorative practices potentially transform the role of the victim from passive object of institutional protection into active participant in the reconstruction of social meaning (Zehr, 1990; Daly, 2002). The victim's voice becomes central, not only as testimony of harm, but as a constitutive element in the relational negotiation of responsibility. From this perspective, victimhood moves beyond recognition toward participation. The victim is no longer simply acknowledged as a bearer of suffering, but becomes a co-producer of accountability, reintegration, and social repair (Braithwaite, 2002; Llewellyn, 2011). This transition marks a crucial step in the broader movement from the social construction of deviance toward the relational construction of responsibility.

the reconstruction rather than the degradation of social identity (Braithwaite, 1989; Maruna, 2001). In punitive contexts, the offender is publicly fixed through the label of deviance (Becker, 1963). Legal processes tend to stabilise this identity by reinforcing stigma, institutional exclusion, and social distance (Goffman, 1963). Restorative practices intervene precisely at this point, creating opportunities for a different form of social interaction that avoids permanent stigmatisation (Braithwaite, 1989). Within restorative encounters, offenders are no longer positioned exclusively as objects of blame, but as accountable subjects capable of recognition, explanation and repair. Victims, in turn, move beyond procedural marginality and become active participants in defining the meaning of harm and the conditions of justice, reclaiming what Nils Christie (1977) famously called their 'stolen conflicts.' Communities also acquire a constitutive role as moral witnesses and agents of reintegration (McCold, 1996).

This participatory architecture transforms justice into a negotiated social process. Responsibility is not merely imposed from above by legal institutions; it is co-produced through dialogue among multiple actors. This is what makes restorative justice sociologically distinctive: it reveals responsibility not as a fixed juridical fact, but as a relational achievement (Llewellyn, 2011; Pavlich, 2005). This relationality is crucial. As Kathleen Daly (2002) observes, restorative justice should not be romanticised as inherently emancipatory. Its effectiveness

depends upon the quality of participation, the balance of power among participants, and the institutional conditions within which restorative practices occur (Daly, 2016).

Indeed, restorative justice remains deeply ambivalent. As critical criminology has long warned, innovations aimed at humanising punishment may also extend the reach of social control. Stanley Cohen's (1985) concept of 'net-widening' remains particularly relevant here: restorative interventions may create additional layers of accountability, surveillance and moral regulation rather than reducing penal intervention (Levant & Daly, 2022).

This ambivalence is central to the present argument. Restorative justice should not be understood as the abandonment of social reaction, but as its transformation (Aertsen et al., 2006). Social reaction persists, but its modalities change: from stigma to dialogue, from exclusion to participation, from fixed deviant identities to potentially reconstructable, responsible identities (Maruna & Ramsden, 2004). It is precisely in this transformation that the concept of relational construction of responsibility becomes visible. Restorative justice creates the social conditions under which responsibility can be negotiated, recognised, and reconstructed. Through acknowledgement of harm, relational accountability and participatory dialogue, justice becomes a site of social redefinition rather than merely a mechanism of sanction. In this sense, restorative justice represents not the negation of labelling processes, but their reconfiguration. If classical criminal justice produces 'outsiders' (Becker, 1963), restorative justice may create conditions for the co-production of responsible social membership (Llewellyn, 2011).

VI. TOWARDS A RELATIONAL CONSTRUCTION OF RESPONSIBILITY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The transformations explored in the previous sections invite a reconsideration of the analytical categories traditionally used to understand the relationship between deviance, victimhood and social control. While classical labelling theory explained how deviant identities are socially produced through processes of stigma and social reaction (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951), contemporary developments in victimology, restorative justice and desistance studies suggest that modern justice systems are increasingly concerned not only with the social production of deviance, but also with the social production of responsibility (Llewellyn, 2011; Honneth, 1995). This article proposes the concept of *relational construction of responsibility* as an interpretative framework capable of accounting for this transformation. The relational construction of responsibility can be defined as the sociological process through which responsibility for crime is co-produced and negotiated among offenders, victims and communities through practices of recognition, accountability, participation and reintegration. Responsibility, from this perspective, is not conceived as a purely individual attribute or merely as the juridical consequence of criminal conduct. Rather, it emerges through social interaction and is continuously reconstructed through processes of dialogue,

symbolic recognition and collective meaning-making (Honneth, 2007; McNeill, 2006).

This conceptual proposal does not seek to replace labelling theory, nor does it offer a normative defence of restorative justice. Instead, it extends the interactionist insight developed by Howard S. Becker (1963), by arguing that contemporary systems of social control increasingly operate through relational and participatory mechanisms that construct responsible identities, rather than merely stabilising deviant ones. If classical labelling theory explained how societies produce 'outsiders,' the present framework seeks to explain how societies may also produce 'responsible subjects' (O'Malley, 2004; Garland, 2001).

This shift does not imply the disappearance of social construction processes. On the contrary, such processes remain central, although their object and function have changed significantly. In traditional punitive paradigms, social reaction contributed primarily to the stabilisation of stigma and the crystallisation of deviant identities (Goffman, 1963). In contemporary relational paradigms, social interaction increasingly aims at reconstructing accountability, repairing damaged relationships, and facilitating reintegration (Braithwaite, 1989; Zehr, 1990). The concept of relational construction of responsibility rests upon four interconnected dimensions.

1. Recognition of Harm

The first dimension concerns the recognition of harm. Crime is understood not simply as a violation of legal norms, but as an event that produces concrete relational consequences (Zehr, 1990; 2015). The acknowledgment of harm constitutes the precondition for any meaningful process of responsibility construction because it allows the experiences of victims, offenders and communities to become socially visible and mutually intelligible (Honneth, 1995). This dimension reflects the victimological shift discussed earlier: harm becomes socially meaningful only when it is recognised and collectively interpreted (Holstein & Miller, 1990; Walklate, 2011).

2. Relational Accountability

The second dimension concerns relational accountability. Responsibility extends beyond the passive acceptance of punishment and involves active engagement with the consequences of one's actions (Braithwaite, 2002). Accountability, in this sense, is dialogical rather than purely punitive (Roche, 2003). The offender is called upon not simply to accept blame, but to recognise the impact of wrongdoing on others and to participate in processes aimed at social repair. Responsibility thus becomes relationally enacted rather than institutionally imposed (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007; Llewellyn, 2011).

3. Participatory Negotiation of Meaning

The third dimension refers to the participatory negotiation of meaning. Responsibility is not unilaterally defined by legal institutions, but emerges through interaction among multiple actors (Pavlich, 2005). Victims, offenders and communities collectively contribute to constructing the meaning of the offence, the significance of harm and the conditions under which repair may occur. This participatory dimension highlights the social nature of responsibility itself, restoring what Christie (1977) termed the "property" of the conflict to the actors

involved. Justice becomes a space of symbolic negotiation in which the interpretation of wrongdoing is co-produced.

4. Reintegration and Identity Reconstruction

The fourth dimension concerns reintegration. Processes of responsibility construction acquire criminological significance only when they create opportunities for the reconstruction of social identities. Building upon John Braithwaite (1989) and contemporary desistance studies (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006), the present framework argues that responsibility becomes transformative when individuals are no longer recognised exclusively through their past wrongdoing, but also through their capacity for change, accountability and reparation. Reintegration therefore represents the social condition under which responsible identities become sustainable (Ward & Maruna, 2007).

Taken together, these four dimensions suggest a broader theoretical movement from the social construction of deviance toward the social construction of responsible identities. This transition may be represented analytically as a sequence of interconnected processes:

Social reaction → Stigma → Recognition of harm → Restorative encounter → Relational accountability → Identity reconstruction → Reintegration and desistance

This sequence should not be understood as linear or deterministic. Rather, it represents an analytical model through which contemporary transformations in social control may be interpreted. The model highlights how processes of classification and exclusion may, under certain conditions, be transformed into opportunities for recognition, accountability and reintegration.

The framework also contributes to bridging criminological traditions that have often developed independently. Labelling theory explains the social production of deviant identities (Becker, 1963); critical victimology explains the social recognition of suffering (Walklate, 2007); restorative justice explains participatory responses to harm (Zehr, 1990); and desistance studies explain the reconstruction of prosocial identities (Maruna, 2001). However, none of these perspectives fully accounts for the mechanisms through which responsibility itself becomes socially negotiated and collectively recognised.

The concept of relational construction of responsibility seeks to fill this gap by offering an integrative analytical framework capable of explaining how contemporary systems of justice increasingly rely on relational practices of recognition and accountability. Importantly, this concept should be understood as an analytical category rather than a normative ideal. Its value lies not in prescribing how justice ought to function, but in explaining how responsibility is socially constructed, negotiated and stabilised within contemporary practices of social control.

VII. RECOGNITION, RELATIONAL JUSTICE AND THE CO-PRODUCTION OF RESPONSIBILITY

The concept of relational construction of responsibility may be further clarified by placing it in dialogue with contemporary theories of recognition and relational justice. This

interdisciplinary engagement allows the proposed framework to move beyond a merely procedural understanding of restorative practices and to conceptualise responsibility as a fundamentally intersubjective and relational phenomenon (Honneth, 1995; Llewellyn, 2011). From the perspective of recognition theory, Axel Honneth (1995, 2007) argues that individual identity is constituted through processes of intersubjective recognition. Human beings become autonomous social actors only insofar as they are recognised by others within social relationships. Conversely, experiences of exclusion, humiliation and misrecognition undermine both personal identity and social participation (Honneth, 2007). This insight is particularly relevant for criminological analysis. Processes of labelling and stigmatisation may be interpreted as forms of institutionalised misrecognition, insofar as they reduce individuals to their deviant status and deny them the possibility of social redefinition (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). The “master status” described by Howard S. Becker (1963) can therefore be understood not only as a mechanism of social classification, but also as a denial of recognition. From this perspective, stigma does not merely classify; it fixes identity through exclusion.

Restorative justice acquires particular significance in this context because it creates social spaces in which reciprocal recognition may become possible (Braithwaite, 1989; Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007). Victims are recognised in their suffering, offenders are recognised as morally accountable subjects capable of change, and communities are recognised as legitimate participants in the reconstruction of social relationships. The relational construction of responsibility thus presupposes a movement from misrecognition to reciprocal recognition (Honneth, 1995). Responsibility becomes possible because social actors are no longer fixed within rigid categories of “victim” and “offender”, but are re-positioned as participants in a shared moral relationship. Recognition therefore constitutes one of the sociological and normative conditions through which responsibility can emerge as a relational achievement.

This interpretation finds an important point of convergence in Jennifer J. Llewellyn’s theory of relational justice. According to Llewellyn (2011, 2012), justice should not be conceived primarily in terms of punishment, proportionality or the protection of abstract rights, but as a process aimed at establishing, repairing and sustaining just relationships. From this perspective, crime represents a rupture in social interconnectedness (Llewellyn & Downie, 2012). Justice, accordingly, requires more than sanction; it requires relational repair. This relational understanding challenges both retributive and purely procedural conceptions of criminal responsibility. Responsibility is no longer understood exclusively as the attribution of blame to an isolated individual, but as a collective process of responding to the relational consequences of harm (Llewellyn, 2011).

Accountability thus becomes inseparable from recognition, participation and repair. This relational perspective provides a particularly fertile foundation for the concept advanced in this article. The relational construction of responsibility can be understood as the sociological mechanism through which recognition and relational justice are translated into concrete practices of accountability and reintegration. Responsibility emerges neither from punishment alone nor from isolated moral

reflection, but from social interactions through which actors negotiate the meaning of harm, acknowledge mutual vulnerability and reconstruct damaged relationships (Honneth, 1995; Llewellyn, 2011). This framework also offers an important reinterpretation of desistance (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006). The transition from deviant identity to responsible identity becomes possible only when individuals are granted opportunities for recognition and when communities are willing to reconfigure their understandings of social membership and belonging (Ward & Maruna, 2007). In this sense, responsibility is not merely an individual burden; it is a relational accomplishment. Integrating recognition theory and relational justice strengthens the analytical foundations of the concept proposed here. It demonstrates that the relational construction of responsibility is not simply a new vocabulary for restorative practices, but an interpretative framework capable of explaining how contemporary systems of justice increasingly move from processes of stigmatising classification toward processes of reciprocal recognition, accountability and reintegration. Ultimately, this shift reflects a broader transformation in social control itself: from the unilateral production of deviance (Becker, 1963) toward the negotiated co-production of responsible social membership (Llewellyn, 2011; Honneth, 1995).

VIII. FROM STIGMA TO DESISTANCE: SOCIAL RECOGNITION AND REDEMPTION SCRIPTS

The transition from the social construction of deviance to the relational construction of responsibility finds one of its most significant empirical and theoretical expressions in desistance studies. Over the last two decades, criminological research on desistance has profoundly redefined the relationship between identity, social control and biographical change (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006; Sampson & Laub, 1993). While classical labelling theory illuminated the mechanisms through which individuals enter and stabilise deviant careers (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951), contemporary desistance scholarship has shifted attention toward the conditions under which those trajectories may be interrupted and transformed (Maruna, 2001). This shift is crucial for the argument developed in this article. If deviance is socially produced through processes of labelling and stigma, desistance reveals how identity can be socially reconstructed through recognition, relational support and opportunities for reintegration (McNeill, 2006; Weaver, 2016). A decisive contribution to this perspective was made by Shadd Maruna (2001), who conceptualised desistance not as a discrete event but as a process of narrative identity reconstruction. According to Maruna, individuals who successfully desist from crime do not simply stop offending; they reinterpret their past through what he defines as “redemption scripts” (Maruna, 2001). These narratives allow individuals to transform deviant experiences into meaningful stages of personal growth and social redefinition. Through this process, past wrongdoing is no longer understood as a fixed determinant of identity, but as part of a

broader narrative of change. This transformation involves a fundamental movement from what Maruna (2001) describes as “condemnation scripts”—narratives characterised by fatalism, stigma and the internalisation of exclusion—toward narratives centred on agency, possibility and moral reconstruction.

However, as labelling theory already implicitly suggested, such transformations cannot be understood purely in individual terms (Becker, 1963). Desistance is not merely a psychological or moral process; it is profoundly social. This point has been strongly emphasised by Fergus McNeill (2006, 2016), who argues that desistance is co-produced through interactions between individuals, institutions and social environments. The possibility of sustaining a new prosocial identity depends not only on internal motivation, but on the willingness of others to recognise and legitimise change (McNeill, 2006; Maruna, 2001). This relational dimension has been further developed by Beth Weaver (2012, 2016), whose work explicitly conceptualises desistance as a relational process of identity transformation. For Weaver, desistance occurs through meaningful social ties and practices of recognition that allow individuals to renegotiate belonging, trust and social membership (Weaver, 2016). From this perspective, desistance cannot be reduced to behavioural cessation; it involves a reconfiguration of the relationship between the individual and the social world.

Recent scholarship on “tertiary desistance” reinforces this argument even further. Beyond primary desistance (cessation of offending) and secondary desistance (identity transformation), tertiary desistance refers to the social and institutional recognition of full reintegration and restored citizenship (McNeill, 2016; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). This distinction is particularly important for the present framework because it highlights that change becomes stable only when it is socially acknowledged.

Here the connection with John Braithwaite (1989) becomes especially relevant. Braithwaite argued that social disapproval can be criminologically effective only when it is accompanied by reinclusion rather than permanent stigmatisation. Without reintegrative practices, sanction risks consolidating deviant identity rather than facilitating transformation (Braithwaite, 1989). In this context, restorative justice emerges as a particularly significant site for desistance processes. Restorative encounters create structured spaces of reciprocal recognition in which offenders, victims and communities participate in validating identity transformation (Braithwaite, 2002; Maruna, 2001).

The restorative encounter thus functions not merely as a procedural response to harm, but as a social arena for the recognition of change. Through acknowledgment, accountability and repair, individuals are offered the possibility of being recognised not exclusively through their deviant past, but through their capacity for responsibility and transformation (Llewellyn, 2011; Zehr, 2015). From this perspective, desistance can be interpreted as the point of convergence between individual change and social recognition. Without recognition, transformation remains incomplete and fragile. With recognition, responsible identities may become socially stabilised. It is precisely here that the concept of relational construction of responsibility finds one of its strongest expressions: as the

sociological mechanism through which desistance becomes not only individually possible, but socially sustainable.

IV. CONCLUSION

THE RELATIONAL RECONFIGURATION OF SOCIAL CONTROL

The present article has argued that the processes of social construction described by labelling theory have not disappeared within contemporary systems of justice (Becker, 1963). Rather, they have been reconfigured through new forms of social control characterised by victim recognition, restorative practices and relational modes of accountability (Garland, 2001; Simon, 2007). Contemporary criminal justice increasingly operates not only through the production of deviant identities, but also through processes aimed at constructing responsibility, facilitating reintegration and reconstructing damaged social relationships (Braithwaite, 1989; Zehr, 2015). In this sense, the growing centrality of victims and the diffusion of restorative justice should be understood not as a supersession of labelling processes, but as their transformation within a changing moral and institutional landscape (Christie, 1986; Walklate, 2011).

The principal theoretical contribution of this article lies in the introduction of the concept of *relational construction of responsibility*. The concept offers an integrative analytical framework capable of connecting four bodies of scholarship that have often developed independently: labelling theory, critical victimology, restorative justice and desistance studies (Becker, 1963; Walklate, 2007; Zehr, 2015; Maruna, 2001). By focusing on the social production of responsibility, the framework extends the interactionist insight developed by Becker and suggests that contemporary societies increasingly seek to construct responsible identities rather than merely stabilising deviant ones (McNeill, 2012; Weaver, 2015). The relational construction of responsibility is therefore proposed as an interpretative category for understanding how accountability, recognition and reintegration become socially negotiated achievements rather than purely juridical outcomes.

Placing criminological debates in dialogue with recognition theory and relational justice further strengthens this argument (Honneth, 1995; Llewellyn, 2011). Drawing upon Honneth's (1995, 2007) conception of recognition and Llewellyn's (2011) relational understanding of justice, the article has argued that responsibility is neither an individual moral burden nor merely the legal consequence of wrongdoing (Honneth, 2007; Llewellyn & Philpott, 2014). Rather, it emerges through processes of reciprocal recognition, participation and social repair (Braithwaite, 1989; Llewellyn, 2011). From this perspective, justice is understood not simply as the allocation of blame or the imposition of sanctions, but as an ongoing process of reconstructing social relationships and renegotiating social membership (Llewellyn, 2011; Honneth, 1995).

The possibility of desistance and reintegration therefore depends not only on individual change but also on opportunities for social recognition and collective redefinition (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2012; Weaver, 2015). At the same time, the article recognises the deeply ambivalent character of restorative and relational forms of justice. As critical criminology has repeatedly demonstrated, innovations aimed at humanising punishment may also extend

the reach of social control through new forms of responsabilisation, surveillance and moral regulation (Cohen, 1985; Rose, 1999; O'Malley, 2004). Restorative practices are therefore not inherently emancipatory; their effects depend upon institutional contexts, power relations and the quality of participation among the actors involved (Daly, 2022; Gavrielides, 2014).

For this reason, the concept of relational construction of responsibility should be understood as an analytical category rather than a normative ideal. It does not assume that restorative practices necessarily reduce exclusion or stigma; rather, it seeks to explain the social conditions under which responsibility may be negotiated and reconstructed without reproducing permanent forms of marginalisation. The framework proposed here also opens important avenues for future empirical research. Further studies should investigate the conditions under which relational responsibility is produced, recognised and sustained across different institutional and cultural contexts (McNeill, 2012; Weaver, 2015). Particular attention should be devoted to the role of digital technologies, the permanence of online stigma, the dynamics of victim participation and the social mechanisms that facilitate or obstruct reintegration and desistance (Zuboff, 2019; van Dijk, 2023).

Empirical research on restorative practices may also contribute to clarifying whether contemporary systems of justice are genuinely capable of transforming processes of exclusion into opportunities for social repair and responsible social membership (Daly, 2022; Zehr, 2015). Ultimately, the challenge for contemporary criminology is not to imagine a society beyond social reaction, but to understand how processes of social definition and accountability can be reconfigured so that conflict becomes an opportunity for recognition, reintegration and the reconstruction of social bonds rather than a mechanism of permanent identity fixation and exclusion.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author wishes to express her deepest gratitude to Professor Nicola Malizia, Full Professor of Criminology and Sociology of Deviance at the Department of Human and Social Sciences, Kore University of Enna. His intellectual guidance and invaluable mentorship over the last fourteen years have been fundamental to the author's academic development and to the conceptualization of the research presented in this article.

REFERENCES

- [1] Aas, K. F. (2011). Globalization and crime. SAGE Publications.
- [2] Aertsen, I., Daems, T., & Robert, L. (Eds.). (2006). Institutionalizing restorative justice. Willan Publishing.
- [3] Becker, H. S. (1963). Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance. Free Press.
- [4] Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge. Doubleday.
- [5] Braithwaite, J. (1989). Crime, shame and reintegration. Cambridge University Press.
- [6] Braithwaite, J. (2002). Restorative justice & responsive regulation. Oxford University Press.
- [7] Christie, N. (1977). Conflicts as property. The British Journal of Criminology, 17 (1), 1–15.
- [8] Christie, N. (1986). The ideal victim. In E. Fattah (Ed.), From crime policy to victim policy (pp. 17–30). Macmillan.

- [9] Cohen, S. (1985). Visions of social control: Crime, punishment and classification. Polity Press.
- [10] Crawford, A. (2002). The modernization of criminal justice. Cavendish.
- [11] Daly, K. (2002). Restorative justice: The real story. Theoretical Criminology, 6 (2), 133–161.
- [12] Daly, K. (2016). What is restorative justice? Fresh answers to a vexed question. Victims & Offenders, 11 (1), 9–29.
- [13] Daly, K. (2022). The concepts and practices of restorative justice. Cambridge University Press.
- [14] Dignan, J. (2005). Understanding victims and restorative justice. Open University Press.
- [15] Duggan, M. (2018). Victimology: Key concepts and contemporary issues. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [16] Durkheim, É. (1893). De la division du travail social [The division of labour in society]. Félix Alcan.
- [17] Durkheim, É. (1895). Les règles de la méthode sociologique [The rules of sociological method]. Félix Alcan.
- [18] Elias, R. (1986). The politics of victimization: Victims, victimology, and modern justice. Oxford University Press.
- [19] Elias, R. (1993). Victims still: The political manipulation of crime victims. SAGE Publications.
- [20] Erikson, K. T. (1962). Notes on the sociology of deviance. Social Problems, 9(4), 307–314.
- [21] Feeley, M. M., & Simon, J. (1992). The new penology: Notes on the emerging strategy of corrections and its implications. Criminology, *30*(4), 449–474.
- [22] Foucault, M. (1975). Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison [Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison]. Gallimard.
- [23] Fraser, N., & Honneth, A. (2003). Redistribution or recognition? A political-philosophical exchange. Verso
- [24] Garfinkel, H. (1956). Conditions of successful degradation ceremonies. American Journal of Sociology, 61(5), 420–424.
- [25] Garland, D. (2001). The culture of control: Crime and social order in contemporary society. Oxford University Press.
- [26] Gavrielides, T. (Ed.). (2014). A reader on restorative justice. Nova Science Publishers.
- [27] Goffman, E. (1963). Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity. Prentice-Hall.
- [28] Goodey, J. (2005). Victims and victimology: Research, policy and practice. Longman.
- [29] Harcourt, B. E. (2007). Against prediction: Profiling, policing, and punishing in an actuarial age. University of Chicago Press.
- [30] Holstein, J. A., & Miller, G. (1990). Rethinking victimization: An interactionist perspective. Symbolic Interaction, 13(1), 103–122.
- [31] Honneth, A. (1995). The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts. MIT Press.
- [32] Honneth, A. (2007). Disrespect: The normative foundations of critical theory. Polity Press.
- [33] Hughes, E. C. (1945). Dilemmas and contradictions of status. American Journal of Sociology, 50(5), 353–359.
- [34] Johnstone, G. (2011). Restorative justice: Ideas, values, debates (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- [35] Johnstone, G., & Van Ness, D. W. (Eds.). (2007). Handbook of restorative justice. Willan Publishing.
- [36] Kitsuse, J. I. (1962). Societal reaction to deviant behavior: Problems of theory and method. Social Problems, 9(3), 247–256.
- [37] Lageson, S. E. (2020). Digital punishment: Privacy, stigma, and the individual in the information age. Oxford University Press.
- [38] Lemert, E. M. (1951). Social pathology: A systematic approach to the theory of sociopathic behavior. McGraw-Hill.
- [39] Levant, E., & Daly, K. (2022). Restorative justice and net-widening. In The Oxford Handbook of Criminology. Oxford University Press.
- [40] Link, B. G., & Phelan, J. C. (2001). Conceptualizing stigma. Annual Review of Sociology, 27, 363–385.
- [41] Llewellyn, J. J. (2011). Restorative justice: Thinking relationally. Professor's Chair, 8, 1–5.
- [42] Llewellyn, J. J. (2012). A relational vision of justice. In J. J. Llewellyn & D. Philpott (Eds.), Restorative justice, reconciliation, and peacebuilding (pp. 89–107). Oxford University Press.
- [43] Llewellyn, J. J., & Downie, J. G. (Eds.). (2012). Being relational: Reflections on relationships and social roles. UBC Press.
- [44] Llewellyn, J. J., & Philpott, D. (Eds.). (2014). Restorative justice, reconciliation, and peacebuilding. Oxford University Press.
- [45] Malizia, N. (2018). *Dalla devianza alla rivalutazione della vittima*. libreriauniversitaria.it Edizioni.
- [46] Maruna, S. (2001). Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives. American Psychological Association.
- [47] Maruna, S., & Ramsden, D. (2004). Living to tell the tale: Redemption scripts and the social psychology of desistance. In After crime and punishment (pp. 129–149). Willan Publishing.
- [48] Mawby, R. I., & Walklate, S. (1994). Critical victimology: International perspectives. SAGE Publications.
- [49] McCold, P. (1996). Restorative justice and the role of community. In B. Galaway & J. Hudson (Eds.), Restorative justice: International perspectives (pp. 85–102). Criminal Justice Press.
- [50] McEvoy, K., & Mika, H. (2002). Restorative justice and the critique of informalism in Northern Ireland. The British Journal of Criminology, 42(3), 534–562.
- [51] McNeill, F. (2006). A desistance paradigm for offender management. Criminology & Criminal Justice, 6(1), 39–62.
- [52] McNeill, F. (2012). Four forms of “offender” rehabilitation: Towards an interdisciplinary perspective. Legal and Criminological Psychology, 17(1), 18–36.
- [53] McNeill, F. (2016). Desistance and criminal justice in Scotland. In Scotland's Choices: The Referendum and What Happens Next. Oxford University Press.
- [54] Miers, D. (1989). Positivist victimology: A critique. Victimology, 14(1), 3–22.
- [55] Nugent, B., & Schinkel, M. (2016). The pain of desistance. Theoretical Criminology, 20(4), 568–584.
- [56] O'Malley, P. (2004). Risk, uncertainty and government. GlassHouse Press.
- [57] Parsons, T. (1951). The social system. Routledge.
- [58] Pavlich, G. (2005). Governing paradoxes of restorative justice. GlassHouse Press.
- [59] Pemberton, A. (2015). Victimology: A social science perspective. Wolters Kluwer.
- [60] Phelan, J. C., Link, B. G., & Dovidio, J. F. (2008). Stigma and prejudice: One animal or two? Social Science & Medicine, 67(3), 358–367.
- [61] Pratt, J. (2007). Penal populism. Routledge.
- [62] Roche, D. (2003). Accountability in restorative justice. Oxford University Press.
- [63] Rock, P. (2002). Victimology. In M. Maguire, R. Morgan, & R. Reiner (Eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Criminology (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- [64] Rose, N. (1999). Powers of freedom: Reframing political thought. Cambridge University Press.
- [65] Rose, N. (2000). Government and control. The British Journal of Criminology, 40(2), 321–339.
- [66] Ross, E. A. (1901). Social control: A survey of the foundations of order. Macmillan.
- [67] Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1993). Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points through life. Harvard University Press.
- [68] Schur, E. M. (1971). Labeling deviant behavior: Its sociological implications. Harper & Row.
- [69] Simon, J. (2007). Governing through crime: How the war on crime transformed American democracy and created a culture of fear. Oxford University Press.
- [70] Strobl, R. (2004). Constructing the victim: Theoretical reflections and empirical examples. International Review of Victimology, 11(2-3), 295–311.
- [71] van Dijk, J. (2023). The network society (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- [72] Walklate, S. (2007). Imagining the victim of crime. McGraw-Hill Education.

- [73] Walklate, S. (2011). *Critical victimology: Selected readings*. Taylor & Francis.
- [74] Ward, T., & Maruna, S. (2007). *Rehabilitation: Beyond the risk paradigm*. Routledge.
- [75] Weaver, B. (2012). The relational context of desistance: Some implications and opportunities for social policy. *Social Policy & Administration*, 46(4), 395–412.
- [76] Weaver, B. (2015). Offending and desistance: The role of social relationships. Routledge.
- [77] Weaver, B. (2016). Co-producing desistance: Ways of being and of working. *European Journal of Probation*, 8 (2), 86–106.
- [78] Zehr, H. (1990). *Changing lenses: A new focus for crime and justice*. Herald Press.
- [79] Zehr, H. (2015). *The little book of restorative justice: Revised and updated*. Skyhorse Publishing.
- [80] Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. PublicAffair.

AUTHORS

First Author – Valentina Moncada, PhD in Contexts, Environments, and Lifestyles for Health and Well-being; Sociologist and Subject Expert in Sociology of Deviance and Criminology, Departement of Human and Social Sciences, University of Enna “Kore”

Correspondence Author – Valentina Moncada, valentina.moncada@unikorestudent.it, mobile +39.3276931433