

The Architecture of Injustice: A Qualitative Exploration of Attributed Cruelty, Wrongful Accusation, and the Fragmentation of the Self

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ABSTRACT

Wrongful accusation and attributed cruelty represent profound assaults on human identity, with psychological, social, and cultural consequences that persist far beyond the immediate event. This qualitative study examines the interplay between the harm-inflicting agent and the target of injustice, focusing on how systemic, social, and individual mechanisms intersect to perpetuate harm. Narrative cinema was analysed alongside empirical studies of wrongful conviction, social stigma, and systemic abuse. Using thematic analysis, five key themes emerged: systemisation as colonisation, social branding, behavioural paralysis and silencing, adaptive coping strategies, and the central role of social validation in identity reconstruction. Findings indicate that while adaptive strategies aid survival, full recovery requires explicit recognition of narrative truth by society. This study contributes a multi-level framework for understanding how systemic injustice shapes the psyche and highlights pathways for victim recovery and resilience. Critical engagement with counterarguments, including the potential for false victimhood narratives and the limits of cinematic analogy, strengthens the analysis.

Keywords: Wrongful accusation, attributed cruelty, defence mechanisms, social scapegoating, traumatic identity, social validation, qualitative research, narrative cinema

INTRODUCTION

Wrongful accusation is not merely a legal error. It is a profound psychological and social violation that disrupts the core of personal identity. When an individual is falsely accused, their internal reality is forcibly replaced by an imposed narrative, often constructed by systems, social groups, or authoritative figures. This imposition produces immediate and long-term consequences, including helplessness, anxiety, depression, chronic distrust of authority, alienation from communities, prolonged social stigma, and difficulties reintegrating into professional and personal spheres (American University Washington College of Law, 2024; Garrett, 2011). The harm is not incidental but structural and it is embedded in the very architecture of how systems and societies process deviance, uncertainty, and threat.

While previous research has largely focused on procedural and legal dimensions of wrongful conviction (Gross et al., 2005; Garrett, 2011), fewer studies have examined the complex interplay of systemic, psycho-social, and individual factors shaping the lived experience of injustice. Understanding these processes requires a dual focus on the structural mechanisms that perpetuate harm, and the psychological strategies employed by victims to preserve identity and agency. Moreover, existing literature often treats recovery as an individual psychological process, under emphasising the relational and narrative conditions under which healing becomes possible. This study addresses that gap.

Narrative cinema offers a unique lens for qualitative analysis, providing symbolic and illustrative depictions of the psychological and social dynamics inherent in wrongful accusation. Films dramatise systemic cruelty and highlight resilience strategies under extreme stress. While cinematic narratives are not mere illustrations, they

can be theoretically generative. They simplify, exaggerate, and make clear patterns that might be hidden in case law or clinical data. By integrating cinematic analysis with empirical literature on real-world wrongful convictions, this study seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which injustice operates and identify pathways through which victims can reclaim narrative control and reconstruct their sense of self.

Research Questions

1. How do systems and communities perpetuate wrongful accusation and cruelty?
2. What psychological mechanisms do victims employ to preserve identity under force?
3. How does social validation contribute to the restoration of the self among victims of injustice?

Three limitations are necessary before proceeding. Cinematic narratives are constructed artifacts and they do not represent empirical reality but dramatise it. This study treats them as analogical evidence, useful for generating hypotheses and illustrating mechanisms, but not as proof of prevalence. Second, the focus on victim psychology risks neglecting the perspective of actors and future research should examine how perpetrators rationalise harm. Third, the concept of narrative truth (Spence, 1982) is itself contested and some critics argue that memory is reconstructive and that victims may inadvertently distort their own histories. This study acknowledges these complexities but maintains that social validation of subjective experience, not forensic certainty, is the relevant therapeutic target. Furthermore, the selection of films predominantly from Western and Indian contexts introduces cultural bias. Attributed cruelty may operate differently in collectivist societies or under inquisitorial legal systems. Despite these limitations, the cross-cultural commonalities in cinematic depictions suggest that certain mechanisms, such as scapegoating and externalisation, may be trans-systemic if not universal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Attributed Cruelty and the Infrastructure of Harm

Systems are created to enforce rules and maintain social order, but they often end up causing harm through the way they are structured and operate. According to Gabbard and Williams (2001), anonymity in bureaucratic systems allows individuals to avoid personal responsibility, which can lead to cruelty and injustice becoming normal or accepted. This problem is not simply due to a few “bad” individuals, but rather it is built into the system itself. Systems tend to value obedience, efficiency, and avoiding risk, sometimes at the cost of fairness and careful, context-sensitive judgment. The hostility found within these infrastructures is a measurable psychological force rather than a mere bureaucratic byproduct. It emerges when a system strips an individual of their personal history and replaces it with a negative label (Link & Phelan, 2001). This process is fuelled by social conformity and the destabilising effects of anonymity within large systems. When individuals within these systems simply follow orders, they participate in a collective aggression that treats the accused not as a person but as a problem to be processed (Zimbardo, 2004). This environment creates a profound sense of badness that the victim is forced to inhabit, leading to an immediate crisis of identity. Attributed cruelty encompasses both overt punitive actions, such as imprisonment and solitary confinement, and subtle reinforcements of social and hierarchical inequities, including optional profiling and denial of appeal resources. These mechanisms compound the victim's suffering.

Externalisation is a key mechanism by which harm is maintained. Ogden (1979) describes externalisation as the projection of collective anxieties or systemic failures onto a specific individual, transforming them into a scapegoat for systemic or societal shortcomings. This process helps the system maintain stability. By placing blame on one individual, the system avoids examining its own structures and problems. Akhtar (2002) further notes that dehumanisation allows perpetrators to rationalise harm as necessary or justified, often through linguistic framing such as labelling someone a security risk or a non-compliant element.

Studies on wrongful convictions demonstrate that systems often prioritise operational efficiency and procedural conformity over individual wellbeing, perpetuating cycles of victimisation even after errors are formally recognised (Gross et al., 2005). For example, exonerees frequently report that prison staff, courts, and parole boards continue to treat them as guilty even after legal reversal, a phenomenon termed residual stigma (Garrett, 2011). Attributed cruelty thus functions both systemically and psychologically in a way in which victims navigate environments that restrict autonomy, enforce compliance, and necessitate adaptive survival strategies. These adaptive responses, while protective in the short term, can reinforce the influence of systemic mechanisms long after formal justice has been achieved.

Recent organisational psychology literature, such as Vaughan's (1999) work on normalised deviance, conceptualises such patterns as routine rule violations that become standard practice. This suggests that attributed cruelty is not unusual but endemic to hierarchical, risk-averse systems. However, a counterargument must be considered. Systems also serve protective functions, and some procedural rigidity exists to ensure fairness across cases. The challenge lies in distinguishing between legitimate procedural constraints and unnecessary cruelty. Future research should examine truth-teller and bystander dynamics so as to investigate why some individuals within systems resist cruelty while others comply? Additionally, much of the literature on attributed cruelty originates from Western carceral systems and non-Western contexts, where family or community networks may mediate systemic power, remain understudied. This study cannot claim that all systems operate identically, but the recurrence of externalisation across diverse settings suggests a robust pattern.

2.2 Psychological Impact of Wrongful Accusation

Wrongful accusation produces profound psychological consequences that extend far beyond the immediate event. Fernando (1998) identifies a state of arrested processing, in which the victim's ability to integrate and cognitively process trauma is temporarily halted. Behavioural paralysis often follows, where individuals are unable to advocate for themselves due to repeated invalidation by external authorities and social groups. Under the weight of such cruelty, the mind's standard coping mechanisms often fail, leading to a more primitive level of psychological functioning. When a person is faced with an overwhelming reality that cannot be integrated, such as a total and false denial of their innocence, the mind may begin to fragment as a survival strategy. This fragmentation acts as a fundamental defence where the individual's internal world is split to protect the core self from complete destruction (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). In this state, the victim might experience a psychological shutdown, where they begin to view themselves through the hostile lens of the system. This is not a sign of weakness but a mechanical necessity of the mind attempting to endure a reality that has become predatory (Haney, 2020). This paralysis is not simply fear but a learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972) that means after repeated failures to be believed, victims stop trying.

Defence mechanisms such as protective denial and the formation of psychological shields help victims preserve their sense of self under extreme stress (Cramer, 2006; Clark, 1998). Denial, for instance, allows the victim to function day-to-day by compartmentalising the accusation. However, these mechanisms are insufficient for long-term recovery. Without social validation and recognition of the victim's narrative, these strategies may solidify, producing chronic anxiety, identity fragmentation, and difficulty reintegrating into social and professional contexts (Vaillant, 1992; Pizer, 1992).

Empirical evidence from exonerees supports these findings. Individuals released from wrongful imprisonment often report persistent mistrust of systems, difficulty forming and maintaining social relationships, and ongoing experiences of shame and self-doubt (Garrett, 2011). Critically, these effects are not purely psychological and they interact with material realities such as loss of employment, housing instability, and family estrangement. Thus, the psychological impact of wrongful accusation must be understood as embodied and embedded, not merely a mental state but a socio-material condition.

Some scholars, notably McNally (2003), caution against over-pathologising trauma responses, arguing that what appears as paralysis may be strategic restraint in a hostile environment. This study adopts a non-pathologising stance in which adaptive coping mechanisms are rational responses to abnormal conditions, not symptoms of

disorder. However, a further complication arises not because all victims experience the same psychological trajectory. Pre-existing resilience factors, such as secure attachment histories or prior exposure to adversity, may moderate outcomes. The literature has paid less attention to these individual differences, instead focusing on common effects. Moreover, most empirical studies rely on retrospective self-report, which is vulnerable to memory biases and the very narrative disruption that victims suffer. Prospective longitudinal studies following accused individuals from the point of accusation would strengthen causal claims, but such research poses ethical and practical challenges. Finally, the psychological literature rarely distinguishes between short-term crisis responses and long-term characterological changes and this study suggests that repeated invalidation can produce enduring identity fragmentation, not merely transient distress.

2.3 Social Scapegoating and Collective Defence

Communities perpetuate injustice through mechanisms of scapegoating and collective defence. Schafer (1994) observes that communities often externalise internal fears, anxieties, or moral conflicts onto individual victims, transforming them into symbolic bearers of collective dysfunction. This process is particularly potent during periods of social anxiety, such as economic recession, terrorism fears, or moral panics, where uncertainty heightens the need for a clear villain. Lax (1989) highlights the internalisation of social labels, where victims absorb negative evaluations imposed by the community, further destabilising identity.

Social branding functions as a form of collective hostility where the community projects its own fears and aggressive impulses onto the accused. Society often has a structural need to identify a villain to restore a sense of order and safety (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989). This scapegoating allows the public to discharge their own internal tensions onto a single target. As the victim is increasingly rejected, they experience intense bad feelings such as extreme humiliation and a deep sense of disappointment in human fairness. These feelings are so painful that the victim may resort to a state of total silence and withdrawal. This silence is often misinterpreted by the public as a sign of guilt, when in fact it is a protective barrier against further emotional assault (Abramson et al., 1978).

High-profile wrongful accusations demonstrate the dynamics of social branding and stigma. Even after legal exoneration, media coverage and societal perception often continue to frame individuals as culpable, prolonging trauma and hindering reintegration (Gross et al., 2005). Social branding protects the collective from confronting systemic issues but inflicts ongoing harm on individuals, illustrating the intricate interplay between social, psychological, and systemic mechanisms in sustaining injustice.

Not all communities respond uniformly. Some studies, such as Norris's (1992) work on reintegrative shaming, identify contexts where communities condemn the act but not the actor, facilitating repair. However, this is rare in cases of wrongful accusation, where the accusation itself becomes the identity. The difference lies in whether the community has prior trust in the accused and whether systemic channels offer swift correction. A significant counterargument is that social scapegoating, while harmful, serves a genuine social function, it reaffirms group boundaries and moral values. Without scapegoating, communities might experience prolonged uncertainty and internal conflict. This functionalist perspective does not excuse the harm but explains its persistence. Additionally, the digital age has transformed scapegoating dynamics. Social media enables rapid, anonymous, and often irreversible branding, bypassing traditional systemic safeguards such as presumption of innocence. This study's reliance on cinematic and pre-digital empirical literature may underrepresent the velocity and scale of contemporary online scapegoating. Future research must examine how algorithmic amplification interacts with collective defence mechanisms.

2.4 Narrative Reconstruction and Social Validation

Recovery from wrongful accusation requires the re-establishment of narrative coherence and social recognition. Sullivan (1953) and Pizer (1992) emphasise that social validation, the explicit acknowledgement of a victim's narrative by community members, family, and systems, is critical for identity reconstruction. Recognition of narrative truth enables cognitive and emotional processing of trauma and facilitates reintegration into social

networks. Without validation, the victim remains trapped in a double bind that they know their innocence but are treated as guilty, producing chronic knowledge based dissonance.

Cinematic narratives provide illustrative examples. The careful maintenance of a private narrative and eventual reintegration into a supportive social network exemplify the relational nature of identity restoration (Grand, 1997). Empirical studies similarly indicate that exonerees who experience social recognition, whether from family, advocacy groups, or formal apologies, demonstrate higher resilience, improved psychological outcomes, and successful reintegration (Vaillant, 1992).

However, social validation is neither binary nor guaranteed. Partial validation, such as "We believe you, but you still brought it on yourself," may be more harmful than outright rejection because it creates conditional acceptance. Moreover, validation must be performative, spoken, witnessed, and colonised, not merely felt. This study extends Pizer's work by arguing that validation functions as a speech act (Austin, 1962) and it changes the victim's social reality by publicly reclassifying them. A critical limitation of the validation literature is its individualistic framing, as validation is treated as something given to the victim rather than as a relational achievement co-constructed between the victim and the community. Furthermore, not all victims desire public validation yet, some prefer privacy and quiet reintegration. The assumption that validation is universally therapeutic may be culturally specific. In collectivist cultures, family validation may be sufficient without systemic recognition while in honour-based cultures, public validation may be essential but also dangerous. This study calls for a more nuanced, culturally situated understanding of validation rather than a one-size-fits-all prescription.

METHODS

This study employs a constructivist qualitative approach, integrating narrative cinema analysis with empirical literature on wrongful conviction, systemic injustice, and psychological trauma. The constructivist framework acknowledges that knowledge of injustice is not neutral but co-constructed between researcher, texts, and readers (Charmaz, 2014).

Data Sources

1. Cinematic Case Studies (selected for diversity of systemic context and cultural origin):

- *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994)
- *My Name is Khan* (2010)
- *Veer-Zaara* (2004)
- *Jawan* (2023)
- *The Hunt* (2012)
- *Ta Ra Rum Pum* (2007)

2. Empirical Literature: Peer-reviewed research on wrongful conviction, psychological impact, social stigma, and exoneree outcomes (Gross et al., 2005; American University Washington College of Law, 2024; Garrett, 2011; Norris, 1992).

Data Collection

Films were systematically viewed and annotated using a structured coding sheet that recorded: (a) systemic actors and actions, (b) victim behavioural responses, (c) social and community reactions, (d) turning points, and

(e) resolution mechanisms. Literature was reviewed for psychological and social mechanisms relevant to wrongful accusation, with priority given to empirical studies published after 1990.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: familiarisation, coding, theme development, refinement, theme definition, and synthesis. Coding was iterative. Initial codes were generated from the literature, such as externalisation and protective denial, and then modified or supplemented by inductive codes from films, including fantasy as survival tool and rituals of innocence maintenance. Theoretical triangulation connected psychological, social, and narrative evidence by cross-referencing film themes with empirical findings, for example comparing depicted hypervigilance with exoneree reports of chronic mistrust.

Reflexivity

The researcher acknowledges interpretive subjectivity in cinematic analysis. As a researcher with prior interest in legal psychology, I may be predisposed to victim-centred interpretations. To mitigate bias, I deliberately searched for counter-evidence within films, such as moments where protagonists made poor decisions, and engaged with critical literature questioning the innocent victim trope (Jenkins, 1998). Triangulation with empirical literature further mitigates bias, though limitations include the constructed nature of films and geographic specificity of empirical studies, which are predominantly US and UK based.

FINDINGS

Analysis identified five central themes that directly address the three research questions. Systemisation as colonisation and social branding speak to Research Question 1 (how systems and communities perpetuate harm). Behavioural paralysis and adaptive coping mechanisms address Research Question 2 (psychological mechanisms for preserving identity). Social validation responds to Research Question 3 (restoration of the self). Each theme is discussed below without attributing findings to specific films. Films serve only as illustrations after the thematic claim is established.

4.1 Systemisation as Colonisation (Research Question 1)

Systemisation represents the internalisation of survival strategies imposed by systemic structures. Victims adapt to routines, speech patterns, and emotional restraints required by the system, preserving a core sense of self while becoming dependent on the systemic framework. This is not merely compliance but colonisation, as the colony reshapes habits, emotional responses, and even hopes. Real-world exonerees report similar experiences, including hypervigilance, mistrust of authority, and persistent psychological constraints that outlast their physical release (Gross et al., 2005). One exoneree in Garrett's (2011) study described feeling still in prison years after exoneration, a direct parallel to documented cases of colonial dependency. The theme of colonisation reveals that attributed cruelty operates not only through overt punishment but through the slow erosion of autonomous identity.

In cinematic illustrations, protagonists display this colonisation through altered speech, internalised timetables, and the performance of deference even when unobserved. However, colonisation is not uniform. Some characters weaponise knowledge against the colony, suggesting that colonisation can be resisted through strategic impression. This resistance, while costly, demonstrates that colonial power is never total. The theme directly answers Research Question 1 by showing that systems perpetuate harm not only through active cruelty but through the passive, grinding process of normalisation. Victims come to enforce the system's rules upon themselves, reducing the need for overt coercion.

4.2 Social Branding and Collective Defence (Research Question 1)

Social branding occurs when communities project anxieties and fears onto specific individuals. A person becomes marked as a symbolic vessel for collective prejudice, such as xenophobia, moral panic, or economic insecurity. Media and social narratives reinforce this stigma, prolonging psychological harm even after legal exoneration. Empirical research confirms this pattern and there are instances where the accused individuals are often treated with suspicion by neighbours, employers, and even family members (Gross et al., 2005) even when formally cleared. Social branding functions as a collective defence by defining the victim as deviant, the community reassures itself that evil is external and identifiable.

In cinematic examples, this branding is visible through community gatherings, whispered conversations, and the sudden withdrawal of prior social connections. The theme reveals that communities perpetuate injustice not through malice alone but through a shared need for cognitive closure. Social branding answers Research Question 1 by demonstrating that attributed cruelty is amplified and sustained by informal social networks. The system may initiate the accusation, but the community enforces the stigma. A critical nuance within this theme is that not all social branding is equal. In some cases, the accuser is themselves a victim of inadequate systemic response, and branding emerges from procedural panic rather than organised malice. This complicates the victim-perpetrator binary and suggests that social branding can arise from good-faith but poorly designed systems.

4.3 Behavioural Paralysis and Silencing (Research Question 2)

Behavioural paralysis arises when victims cannot assert their truth due to systemic invalidation. After repeated rejections of their innocence claims, many stop speaking altogether. This silencing is not merely external but internal and it's possible that victims begin to doubt their own right to speak. Empirical evidence from exonerees indicates that this paralysis can persist for years, manifesting as an inability to apply for jobs, initiate relationships, or engage in civic life (Garrett, 2011). The mechanism is not simple fear but learned helplessness and the victim's brain learns that advocacy produces punishment, not relief.

Cinematic illustrations show characters who remain silent for decades, their advocacy attempts systematically blocked by state and cultural barriers. The theme of silencing addresses Research Question 2 by identifying a specific psychological mechanism, behavioural inhibition, that preserves identity in the short term but damages it over time. Paradoxically, silence protects the victim from further retaliation but also erodes the narrative self. The victim's story continues to exist privately but loses social reality. Silencing can be gendered and racialised in a way which women and minorities wrongfully accused face additional layers of incredulity or hypersexualisation. This study's film selection, predominantly with male protagonists, may underrepresent intersectional silencing, but the theme itself is robust across demographics.

4.4 Adaptive Coping Mechanisms (Research Question 2)

Adaptive coping mechanisms, including protective denial, cognitive fantasy, and goal-directed resilience, allow victims to maintain psychological integrity under force. Protective denial permits the victim to compartmentalise the accusation and function in daily tasks. Cognitive fantasy, such as imagining a future after exoneration or constructing elaborate mental escapes, provides emotional relief without requiring external change. Goal-directed resilience channels the energy of injustice into strategic planning and purposeful action. The long term impact of wrongful accusation involves a forced shift in the individual's personality structure. Typically, humans move toward mature coping strategies such as humour or proactive problem solving. However, attributed cruelty forces a developmental reversal. The victim is pushed back into using primitive denial just to survive the day to day hostility of their environment. This creates a shattered self where the person's narrative truth is buried under the weight of the system's official version of events (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). Recovery requires more than just a legal clearing; it requires a systematic re-integration of these fragmented parts of the self through social validation. Empirical evidence supports these strategies as mechanisms for maintaining agency when external control is impossible (Fernando, 1998; Vaillant, 1992).

In cinematic examples, parents shield children from socio-economic adversity through playful fantasy, preserving the children's emotional wellbeing while privately struggling. Other characters channel injustice into long-term projects that restore a sense of purpose. This theme directly answers Research Question 2 by cataloguing the psychological tools victims employ to preserve identity. However, not all coping is adaptive in the long term. Protective denial that persists after the threat ends can become maladaptive avoidance, delaying necessary emotional processing. The boundary between resilience and dissociation is with loopholes and context-dependent. This study finds that adaptive coping mechanisms are necessary but insufficient for full recovery as they preserve the self but struggle in restoration of it to social recognition.

4.5 Social Validation (Research Question 3)

Social validation enables narrative reconstruction and identity restoration. Recognition by family, peers, and society affirms the victim's reality and supports reintegration. Empirical research confirms that legal exoneration alone is insufficient and without social acknowledgment, chronic psychological disruption can persist. (Sullivan, 1953; Pizer, 1992). Exonerees who receive formal apologies or financial compensation report better outcomes, but the most powerful validation often comes from intimate relationships. Validation functions as a speech act and it changes the victim's social reality by publicly reclassifying them from accused to innocent.

Cinematic examples show public acknowledgment of innocence restoring public identity, or peer recognition enabling narrative repair. The theme of social validation answers Research Question 3 by demonstrating that restoration of the self is not an individual achievement but a relational and social process. A critical nuance within this theme is that social validation can be performative and insincere. Systems may issue apologies without structural change and communities may express sympathy privately but avoid public association. This study argues for thick validation, validation that carries material consequences such as reinstatement, compensation, or policy change, and public witness. Without thickness, validation risks becoming another form of cruelty that the appearance of justice without its substance.

4.6 Summary Table: Films and Thematic Analysis

Film	Systemisation as Colonisation	Social Branding Collective Defence	Behavioural Paralysis / Silencing	Adaptive Coping Mechanisms	Social Validation
<i>The Shawshank Redemption</i>	Prison routines create dependence	Prison system externalises failure	Restricted self-expression	Private narrative, goal-oriented planning	Peer recognition restores narrative
<i>My Name is Khan</i>	Bureaucratic profiling reinforces marginalisation	Protagonist as vessel for xenophobia	Limited public advocacy	Persistence, connection with loved ones	Public acknowledgement restores identity
<i>Veer-Zaara</i>	State legal machinery	Cultural assumptions impose guilt	Silence maintained for decades	Emotional endurance, moral integrity	Family and legal recognition

	constrains freedom				
<i>Jawan</i>	Corrupt systems manipulate power	Social fear justifies betrayal	Victimhood suppresses agency	Strategic navigation	Team members/ other prisoners/ prison staff recognition restores agency
<i>The Hunt</i>	School system amplifies accusation	Community spreads panic	Social rejection, restricted defence	Maintenance of private truth	Authorities confirm innocence
<i>Ta Ra Rum Pum</i>	Economic instability affects family	Economic failure projected onto parents	Emotional suppression to protect children	Fantasy construction, protective denial	Family cohesion, societal recognition

Table 1: Thematic Analysis Across Narrative Case Studies

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the profound interplay of structural, social, and psychological mechanisms in perpetuating wrongful accusation and sustaining victimisation. Returning to the three research questions, the findings demonstrate that systems and communities perpetuate harm through externalisation, normalised deviance, and social branding (RQ1). Victims employ adaptive coping strategies including protective denial, fantasy, and goal-directed resilience to preserve identity under duress, though these strategies are necessary but insufficient for recovery (RQ2). Most significantly, full recovery depends on social validation that restores narrative coherence and affirms identity (RQ3).

The most significant finding is that recovery depends on relational and social acknowledgement of truth. This challenges purely biomedical or cognitive-behavioural models of trauma recovery, which often overlook the knowledge based dimension in a way which victims need not only symptom reduction but also restoration of credibility. Without validation, the victim remains trapped in what might be called knowledge based solitary confinement where they possess knowledge of their innocence but cannot have it recognised by others.

Several counterarguments and limitations must be engaged here. First, the claim that social validation is necessary for recovery could be reversed. Perhaps recovery enables victims to seek validation, rather than validation causing recovery. Longitudinal research is needed to establish directionality. Second, some victims report recovering without public validation, finding meaning in private spiritual or artistic practices. This study does not claim validation is the only pathway, only that it is the most reliably effective one based on current evidence. Third, the concept of narrative truth is contested. Critics argue that memory is reconstructive and that victims may unconsciously embellish or alter their stories over time (Spence, 1982). This study does not require perfect historical accuracy. It requires that the victim's subjective experience be taken seriously as the basis for therapeutic intervention. Forensic truth and narrative truth serve different purposes and should not be conflated.

A further critical point concerns the potential for false victimhood narratives. This study focuses on wrongful accusation, but some individuals who claim victimhood may be guilty or may exaggerate harm. The mechanisms described, such as social validation, could in principle be exploited by manipulative actors. However, this risk does not invalidate the therapeutic necessity of validation for genuine victims. The appropriate response is careful systemic screening, not the wholesale withholding of validation. Additionally, the study's reliance on cinematic illustrations introduces the risk of narrative smoothing. Films impose coherent arcs on what is often chaotic, prolonged suffering. Real-world recovery is rarely as linear or dramatic as depicted in cinema. This study has used films as theoretical lenses, not as evidence of typical trajectories.

Finally, the discussion must acknowledge that attributed cruelty is not uniform. Some systems, such as restorative justice programs or ombudsman offices, actively work to reduce harm. The architecture of injustice is matched by an architecture of repair, though the latter is less studied and less funded. Future research should examine conditions under which systems shift from cruelty to accountability, such as leadership changes, external pressure, or legal mandates.

CONCLUSION

Wrongful accusation and attributed cruelty produce enduring harm through intertwined systemic, social, and psychological mechanisms. Victims develop adaptive coping strategies, protective denial, fantasy, and goal-directed resilience, yet full recovery requires social validation that restores narrative coherence and affirms identity. Resilience emerges not solely from individual psychological mechanisms but from relational and social acknowledgment of truth. The architecture of injustice is therefore not uniform but built brick by brick through systemic procedures, community defences, and individual coping responses. Dismantling it requires interventions at all three levels.

This study demonstrates the importance of understanding this architecture through multiple lenses. By integrating cinematic and empirical evidence, it identifies systemic mechanisms, including externalisation and normalised deviance, adaptive coping strategies, and the centrality of social validation in recovery. These insights provide guidance for legal, clinical, and social interventions to support victims of wrongful accusation and facilitate long-term psychological restoration. Ultimately, to be wrongfully accused is to be exiled from one's own story and justice, therefore, is not merely the verdict but the return of narrative ownership.

Declaration

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Conflicts of Interest: The author has no conflicts of interest to report. This research was done independently without any input, funding, or oversight from any organisation or person who might benefit from the findings.

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